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Kathie Rides Alone

by Bill Severn

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December, 1945 Vol. I, No. 1

Western LOVE ☆

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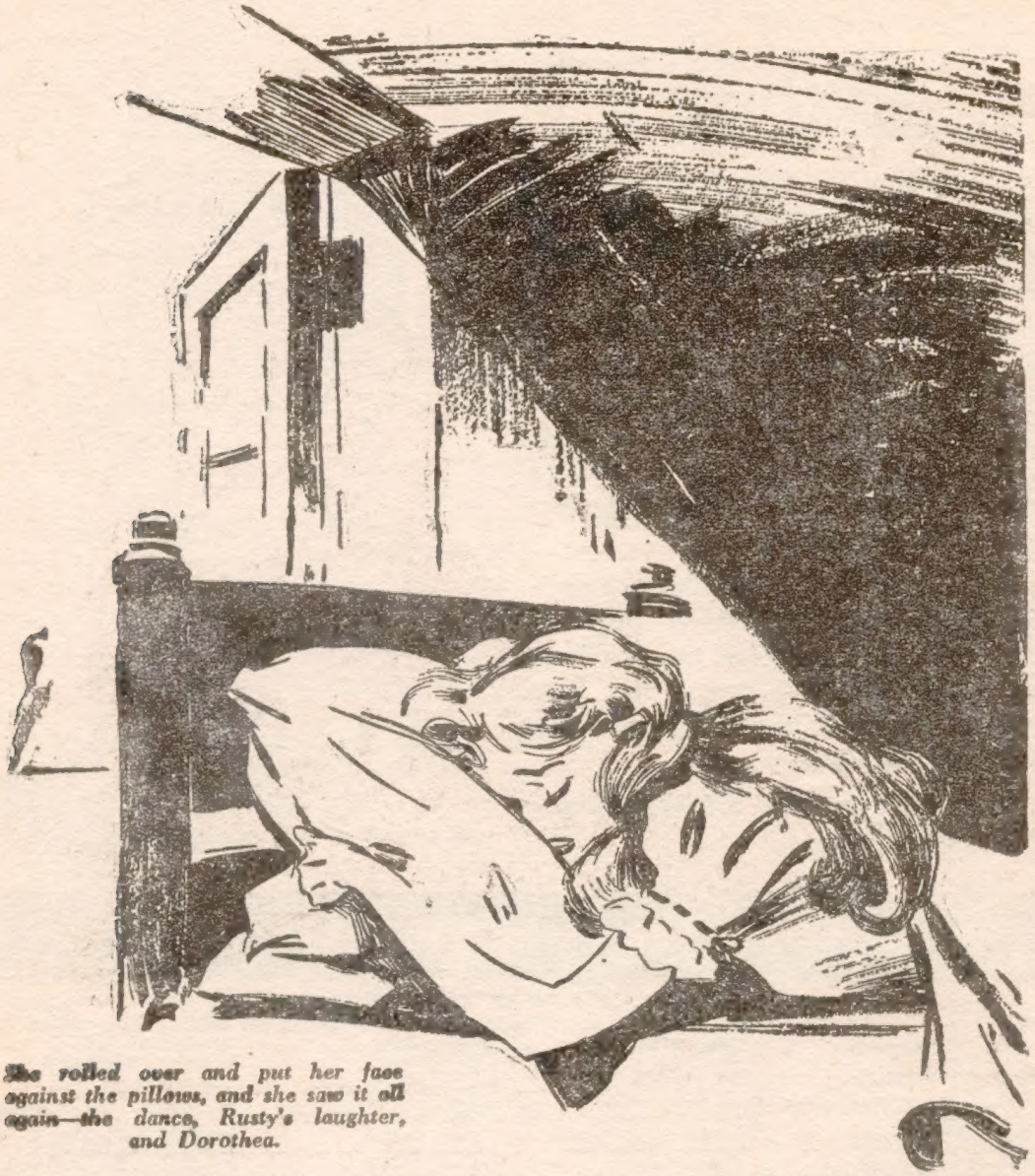
Kathie Rides Alone



She rolled over and put her face against the pillows, and she saw it all again—the dance, Rusty's laughter, and Dorothea.

CHAPTER I

More Than Romance

"OH, RUSTY," Kathie's hands climbed higher around his shoulders, and her lips eagerly found his. "Rusty, darling." Her breath caught, saying his name. For a dangling second she stopped breathing. Her heart stopped. Then there was that wild racing as his kiss brought the full message of his love and her own lips answered, her whole being sang with the deep, complete miracle of loving him.

"We can't wait, Kathie." Rusty's arms cradled her. His whisper was so soft as the evening wind that danced down from the purple of the hills, that tagged across the low brush to the ranchhouse steps of the Circle Cross. "We'll get married Saturday."

Kathie started to nod joyously, to find

★ ★ ★

Kathie wanted to assert herself. She didn't believe that this was a man's world, only. But Rusty wouldn't see her side of it, until things began to happen.

★ ★ ★

By
BILL SEVERN

his lips once more. Then she realized he had said Saturday. And she knew why. And she took her arms away.

Loving him so very much, it took all her strength. But she knew their marriage never could last unless she broke his stubbornness.

Rusty had to learn that she was a person as well as a woman. He had to understand that as a person, she had a mind, and a right to use it. Marriage had to be sharing, fifty-fifty.

Kathie had seen too many women become slaves to the will of their men, especially here in Tyler where the men ran the range and everything upon it, and took it for granted that woman's place was in the kitchen.

Kathie would never be taken for granted. There had been this conflict between them before, a biting cross-cut, sawing at the very timber of the foundations Kathie and Rusty sought to build for a life together. The school vote had made an issue of it. The issue remained.

She held herself away from Rusty now, stood inches away from him on the steps, still trembling in the aftermath of the emotional storm that had surged within her. She couldn't look at Rusty, but she made her voice brave and sure to match

her mind's determination. "The voting is Saturday," she said.

"What voting?"

His masculine stubbornness edged her words with anger. "The school vote," Kathie said.

"Oh, that. I told you before, Kathie—we men got together and talked it over, and we decided no."

"And we women talked it over and we decided yes."

"Men do the voting. That's the law." He reached out his arms to take her into them. "Kathie, please."

"A law made for men by men!" She stepped back. Her hands went to her hips and her head lifted. "Am I less a person because I was born a woman? Because I wear a dress, does that mean I have no right to plan the future of my children?"

RUSTY smiled a little. "You sound like a book. You're crossing a lot of streams before you come to them, Kathie." His voice softened. "When—we have children, I'll let you have a full say about what school we send them to."

"We need the school here. We need culture to tame the raw wilderness and build for the future."

"You've been listening to Vaughn Halsey again." Rusty was angry now too. "I told you to keep away from that book-toting money grabber. You never used to talk like this before he and his sister, that Mildred woman, came to Tyler and stirred everything up."

"I'll see him whenever I want to see him, and you can't stop me, Rusty Collins! Vaughn — Professor Halsey—has sacrificed his time and given all his effort toward making a civilized—"

"Trying to get us to raise a lot of money and turn it over to him to start a fancy school we don't need." Rusty jammed his hands into his pockets. "You and my Aunt Ellen and the other women have no right mixing in things like this."

"It's time we women started taking that right."

"You can talk all you want. The men are voting against it. A school would draw more homesteaders in to settle. More farms to break up the range. Is that what you want? You want to ruin me and your pa and the rest of us ranchers? I thought you were a ranch woman, Kathie—"

"You can't halt progress. With education and proper understanding of—"

"More of Halsey's book talk!" Rusty took her arms, turned her so she faced him. "Now, you listen to me."

"Take your hands away! You're stubborn and selfish and—and I—hate you!"

"Kathie!"

They stood silent a moment, tensely silent. Kathie, frightened by the anger of her words, anger hot in her mouth even as her heart cried out for an end to the bitterness that kept her out of Rusty's arms.

His lips, that had been upon hers so softly, so tenderly, seconds ago, were drawn now to a tight line of resolve. She watched the struggle in his eyes, watched pride and conceit and stubborn masculinity battle his desire.

When he spoke, his voice was quiet, too quiet. "Maybe you don't want to be my wife." He hadn't moved. He was as close as he had been before. But he had drawn himself within a shell of hard determination.

It seemed to her that the Rusty she loved with all her heart was miles away, and here stood an angry stranger.

"Maybe you've got it so twisted around, you want to be the husband and want me to be the wife," he said. "One of us has got to wear the apron. I'm damned sure, Kathie—you're not tying any apron around me."

He walked away, fists swinging at his sides, boots pounding up an angry cloud of dust. He twisted the stirrup, grabbed the saddle horn, swung up to his dun stallion and lifted the reins without looking back at her.

"Rusty." The intended shout came from her lips as a voiceless whisper, robbed of its pleading strength by her mind's resolve.

She watched him ride away and she let her mind try to console her. She let her mind tell her calmly: *Marriage would*

never work unless he's willing to recognize your rights as a person. She let reason argue, *Love has to be a sharing. One person can't do all the giving.*

And it sounded like words strung together in a nice, neat little line with a cold punctuation mark at the end instead of a heartbeak; it sounded like words from one of Prof. Halsey's books. And cold, nice neat little words were nothing to hold together a heart about to break.

Her arms wanted Rusty and her lips wanted him, and all her mind could offer was: *You were right. Rusty will come back and he'll admit you were right.*

Moving toward the ranch-house door, Kathie said, half-aloud, half-afraid: "You don't know Rusty."

CHAPTER II

Stubborn Woman

"THIS AIN'T a woman's business," Pa said. "It's fer men, and you better horn out, Kathie." He forked a flapjack into the thick syrup on his breakfast plate. "Had my way, we'd run that flossy perfesser and his frumped up sister clean out of Tyler."

Kathie put down her cup. "I'm not a child. I won't be ordered about."

"Ain't nothin' you can do 'bout it, 'cepting get yourself all het up. I reckon the perfesser'll be movin' along when the vote goes agin him Saturday." Pa pushed back his chair. "He had some of the townsfolk worked up over it, tellin' 'em a school'd bring in more settlers. We ranch men went around yesterday and did a little convincin' ourselves. Folks in town know they live off the money from the ranches, not the poke-poor homesteaders. The perfesser won't collect money to build himself his fancy school and that'll be that." He wiped his hands.

Kathie held in her anger. She stacked the plates, pumped water into the pan. "I feel so sorry for Professor Halsey, spending all his time trying to help us."

"Sorry for him. Humph!" Pa squinted at her. "You ain't fallin' for more than his fancy talk, are you? You ain't lettin' him and his ways turn you agin Rusty? If I thought that, I'd—"

Rusty stepped into the doorway, holding a gun. "All right, professor — or whoever you are — get going!" he said.

She pushed the pump handle down too hard and it splashed water. "Vaughn—Professor Halsey has never regarded me as—" Her voice lifted and she quoted

him, "—as anything but an enlightened woman willing to work for civilization!"

"Lighted woman, huh? Meddlin' woman's more like it." Pa slipped his leather vest over his plaid shirt, took makings from the pocket and rolled a cigarette. "He ain't so blind, lookin' at them books of his, he can't see you're a pretty girl. You just watch your step. Havin' spunk is one thing. Your mother had plenty of salt too. But there's havin' too much and not knowin' your place." He struck a match. "You're a big girl, Kathie, but not too big to be spanked. And I'm still your pa. Remember that!"

He slammed out the back door and she watched him stomp his way down past the bunkhouse toward the corral.

Kathie sank into the kitchen chair and put her elbows on the table, lowered her head, hands against her face. First Rusty. Now Pa. The men she loved the most, angry and stubborn and fighting with her because she wanted to be a person as well as a woman.

In her mother's day, man's right to rule the home completely was accepted, and marriage was built on that one-sided relationship. But this was 1880. Why, back East, women were working in offices, working in men's jobs. And right here in Tyler, there were women clerking in two stores.

Not that Kathie wanted to become a man or take a man's place. She was essentially feminine and she knew it. *All I want is an equal place beside Rusty, sharing his love, sharing our life and building together as two people, not as a man and the slave in his kitchen.*

And her heart listened to her mind's words again, and asked: *Is it worth it, Kathie? Isn't Rusty's love all you really, truly want and could want, forever?*

She got up, tried to shake herself out of the mood. She washed the berries for the berry cake she had intended to make. It was Rusty's favorite—golden cake and fresh, black berries and the richest thick whipped cream. Thinking of him again, she felt her resolve weakening.

She put the berries away and hung the gingham apron on the peg. She needed support, needed it quickly. She'd go into Tyler and talk to Vaughn. He understood about things like this. He understood so well.

KATHIE got her saddle from the barn and went to the corral and put the saddle on the calico mare. Pa and Rusty had pooled together to get the horse for her birthday. They had brought the mare back all the way down the trail from Kansas after the last drive. Everything she did reminded her of Rusty. Their lives had been so close.

She moved the mare down the trail, up over the rise and across the hill to the road. She and Rusty had traveled this way so many times since they were kids. She remembered the day his father had died. That was before Rusty took over the Bar X. He was seventeen then and she was fifteen. They had ridden here together, both of them silent, Rusty bravely holding back the tears.

They had gone to their own private rock at the top of the mountain and Rusty, taking her hand, had said in that tight voice she never would forget: "It makes it easier, having you with me, Kathie. It makes it a lot easier, knowing I'm not alone and that someone really cares. I have Aunt Ellen, of course. But that's not the same as you and me."

It was the first time Rusty had ever kissed her. He had kissed her boyishly, awkwardly, but so very sweetly. It had been like that with them even then.

"It will always be you and me, Rusty," she had told him that day, feeling suddenly older, no longer a child, as she comforted him; feeling woman-wise beyond her years because of the sure knowledge of love for him that she discovered in her heart.

Going into Tyler now, she passed that cut-off to the mountain, and her arms ached for Rusty. She closed her eyes and urged the mare forward.

Coming into the main street from the north, she felt again the heat that caught the dusty town and held it. Somehow, the heat added to the raw, unfinished

Mildred's eyes burned with hate. Her mouth was a bitter slash. "I'm warning you — leave Vaughn alone!" she said.

appearance of Tyler. Its stores and saloons crowded each other, false fronts elbowing for space on a ragged line, while the whole of outdoors offered all of its space on either side. Tyler was rough, uncivilized. It needed the influence Vaughn and his school could bring.

She rode to the end of the town, to the two unpainted cabins Vaughn and his sister occupied, side by side. Vaughn

had explained to her that he had come West for his health, that he was in temporary retirement, as he put it, from his professorship at an eastern university. He had never said just what was wrong with his health. He seemed healthy enough now. Kathie surmised it was overwork.

But he couldn't stay in retirement. He had told her how he felt compelled to devote his energy to raising money to establish a school in Tyler. He had worked so hard at it, too, getting the townsfolk to insist that a vote be taken on raising the funds.

If Pa and Rusty knew how hard he had worked, they wouldn't dare condemn Vaughn as a "money grabber." It was so hateful even to think of him in those terms.

Kathie looped the reins over the hitch rail and knocked on his cabin door. There was no answer and she knocked again.

The door opened a crack. "Oh, it's you." It was Vaughn's sister, Mildred. She opened the door all the way. "It's your Kathie, Vaughn."

CHAPTER III

The Greeks Had A Way

KATHIE FROWNED at the way Mildred said it.

She was a strange woman, this sister of Vaughn's. Tall and darkly beautiful and quite young. *Probably not much older than I am,* Kathie thought. Her clothes were very expensive, quite daring for Tyler, which wasn't used to Eastern ways. Mildred never mixed with the other women and, although she was politely friendly, Kathie sensed that Mildred disliked her strongly for some reason.

Vaughn came over from his desk, holding out both hands. "How cool and nice you look, Kathie."

He was young too. Kathie never had been able to get over how young he looked for a professor.

"How do you manage it in all this infernal heat?" he asked. He talked so nicely, his words were so carefully pronounced. It made her feel—cultured, just being in his presence.

But he made her feel a bit uneasy too, especially when he looked at her the way he was looking now. Kathie remembered what her father had said: "He ain't so blind, lookin' at them books, he can't see you're a pretty girl."

She said: "I don't feel cool. I've been —so angry. Rusty and my father, the way they've—"

"If you will excuse me," Mildred interrupted, "you two probably would rather discuss this—alone." Mildred accented the words, spaced them out. She picked up a bonnet that had fallen from the sofa to the floor and, swinging it, went out to her own cabin.

Vaughn took Kathie's hand and patted it, and she rebuked herself for the tiny, momentary thrill she felt. She took her hand away.

He nodded toward the sofa. "Won't you sit down?"

He sat next to her, a bit too close, and she inched away. "You've done so much," Kathie said, "spending all your time trying to get the people to vote the funds."

"My only regret is that I haven't the money to finance it personally. Then we shouldn't have to arouse people to such bitterness, arguing over it. I detest quarreling over an issue that is essentially—uh—"

"Cultural," Kathie supplied.

He nodded. "Yes, cultural."

"If we women had the vote," Kathie said, "you'd have the money. We talked it over at the sewing circle last week and everybody—every last one of them was for the school." She smiled a little. "Most of the women are fighting mad about it too. But Pa and Rusty and the other ranchers have sold the men on voting it down."

"Do the women really feel that strongly?" His eyes narrowed slightly. "It is splendid to know that we have full support from wives and mothers, women who are looking to the future their children will have."

"You understand so well, Vaughn."

"I—understand you, Kathie. Noble nature is rare in a man. Some say it is even more rare, true nobility of spirit, in a woman. I admire you very much, Kathie, for the help you have given me. Sometimes, without your support—"

INSTINCTIVELY sympathetic, Kathie put her hand on his arm. "I'll go on fighting for the school. As long as there's a chance, I'll fight."

"You'll—do that for me?"

She glanced up at him.

Vaughn's deep black eyes were intense, direct, searching hers. He lifted his arm, put it around her. His lips moved close. "Kathie . . ."

She momentarily felt that she wanted him to kiss her. His nearness was exciting, thrilling, in a far different way from the security of Rusty's arms. This was nothing deep like that. This was the surging of a desire close to the surface, an attraction that flamed, then died as reason returned before his lips found hers.

"No!" She broke away from his arms and she stood, her back to him. She felt shaken, confused.

"Forgive me," Vaughn said. It seemed to make it even worse that the denial should come from him. "I don't know what happened, except that you are so lovely. Will you accept my apology, my assurance that I had no intention that anything of this nature—"

She turned slowly. "Perhaps," she said softly, "it was a moment neither of us could help." His head lifted eagerly. Kathie added quickly, firmly: "But it must never happen again."

"There's—" His eyes tried to find hers. "There's no chance, Kathie?"

"No." She said it simply, but her heart's fullness was in the words: "I'm going to marry Rusty."

"And I've caused you to argue with him. I've hurt you through my project for the school."

She shook her head. "It had to come. If not the school, then it would be something else. It—it's something Rusty and I have to settle before we can get married. It must be that way."

"If you should lose him because of my—"

"Lose Rusty? Oh, no . . . We love each other." Vaughn's words struck her with sudden fear. She had never thought about losing Rusty, really losing him. She wouldn't think of it now, not for a minute. Why, that—that was something that just couldn't happen.

"Then you are willing to continue to fight for the school funds. I wouldn't want you to—"

"I told you that." Kathie said it quickly, to reassure herself as much as Vaughn. She added more slowly: "It's done now. I can't quit until—it's settled. The school and Rusty's stubbornness and his taking me for granted."

Vaughn got up and crossed to the bookshelf next to the cabin's only window. "I have a plan." He pulled a thick, green book from the shelf. He turned the pages. "The sewing circle meets this afternoon, does it not?"

Kathie nodded. How did Vaughn know that? "Most of the ladies will be there."

Vaughn ran his long finger down the page to a marked paragraph. "This is a history of ancient Greece. I was reading it last night when I came upon this passage. It seemed like—inspiration."

"A—history?"

"A true history. The Greek women were strong-willed. Their men tried to dominate them too. But these particular women wanted to stop a war and they found a way. It—could happen again if the women of Tyler really want a school and will fight for it." Vaughn handed her the book. "Here."

Their fingers touched momentarily and she drew back her hand.

If Vaughn noticed, he gave no indication. "Read that," he said.

CHAPTER IV

No More Kisses

"AND THAT'S the plan," Kathie told the women gathered in Mrs. Walters' parlor. She put down the book Vaughn had loaned her. "It really

Kathie's words died. Vaughn had his arms tight around Mildred. He was kissing her.

happened once. The Greek women stopped a war. We ought to be able to get money to have a school built. And we'll get more than that." She quoted from Vaughn. "We'll win new respect from our men. We'll be recognized as partners. The men we love will respect our right to think, as well as to be women."

"Sounds right rough on the menfolks —on us too," said Aunt Ellen Collins. "But I'm with you." Rusty's aunt was a large, genial woman who loved him, in her way, as much as Kathie did. Both knew how stubborn he could be.

"We can do it," Kathie went on, "only if we all stick together. No more fancy food for the men, no more dancing, no more kisses—unless they vote the way we want them to vote."

"You're simply ridiculous, Kathie," Dorothea Ellbe objected. "I won't do any such thing. We're women, not men. We have no right mixing into men's affairs."

"We have a right to lives of our own, and it's time the men woke up to it," Kathie shot back. "We want a school for our children and for their children."

"Kathie's right," Mrs. Walters broke in. "Even if it does nothing else, it will make our men realize what they have taken for granted."

"Well?"

There was a moment of excited talking. The women whispered to each other. Kathie asked for a show of hands. All hands went up except Dorothea's.

"Then it's settled." Kathie closed the book. "No more fancy cooking, no more dances, no more kisses."

"We won't go to the dance tomorrow night," Mrs. Walters added. "We'll start with that."

"We'll start right now," Kathie said. "And we will go to the dance. But when we get there—we won't dance."

There was a laughing chorus of approval from the other women, determined

laughter, all through the room.

Aunt Ellen lifted the cup of tea she had been drinking. "To the petticoat revolution," she toasted.

Some lifted cups. Others raised crocheting needles as if they were lances. The women smiled and they laughed, but they meant it. The women were with her.

All except Dorothea. She picked up her shawl and went to the door. "It's wicked," she said. "It's downright wicked."

PA was waiting for Kathie in the kitchen when she returned to the Circle Cross. He seemed pleased with himself about something, and his morning's anger apparently was forgotten. "Rusty and me got together and chewed some words," he told Kathie. "Everything's goin' to be all right. I told him you was sorry 'bout the way you been actin'. He's coming fer supper, so you better cook him a good one. Then you can make up and—"

"I meant it." Kathie faced him. "And I'm not cooking any fancy supper. There's a pot of beans on the stove and bread in the cupboard. You two can make your own."

"Kathie!" Pa strode across the room. "What's the meanin' of this?"

"Just what I say." She moved toward the parlor. "I have some poetry I want to read."

"Poetry—you—" he sputtered.

Kathie walked out, left him standing there, his mouth wide open.

She went into the parlor and opened a book and pretended to read. Pa stormed after her. "You defyin' me? I done all I could to fix things with you and Rusty and this is what I get for it." He took a step. "It's that slick professor and his sister. He's been stuffin' your head with flossy thinkin'. Well, I aim to—"

"Don't you dare talk about Vaughn that way. You don't know a thing about him. Just because he's cultured and not rough and—"

"Cultured, eh?" Pa grabbed her shoulders, lifted her to her feet. "Now you listen to me. You're goin' to stop seein' him, understand? I know a dog's bad when he turns his head and won't look in your eyes, straight and honest. Halsey does the same. I know men. I know he ain't on the square. And I know you ain't goin' to see him agin."

"I won't be ordered around."

"No?" Pa plumped himself down on the sofa. He started to pull her across his knee. "I told you that you're still enough of a girl to be—"

There was a knock on the door.

"It's Rusty!" Kathie squirmed away from Pa.

Pa sat, breathing hard, glaring at her. "We'll settle this later," he said meaningly. "We'll see who's runnin' this house."

Kathie put her fingers on the door handle, raised the bar. "Spanking," she told Pa calmly, "won't settle this." She swung the door open.

"Kathie." Rusty's expectant smile was so appealing. His eyes upon hers were so much harder to fight than Pa's threat of punishment. It was like battling her own heart.

"Hello." She tried to make it sound casual, cold.

"Your pa said you—" He laughed, a trifle embarrassed. "He said you had some berries and you might be cooking me a berry cake. I thought I'd kind of drop in and see."

"Oh! A cake. You didn't want to see me. You just wanted me to cook for you."

"Now, Kathie. You know I didn't mean it like that." He reached out for her hand.

She avoided his grasp. But she couldn't stand here looking at him. She couldn't stay this close to his arms, this near to him. "Well, I'm not cooking any berry cake," she said. "I'm not cooking anything." She pretended a yawn. "I'm tired and I'm going to sleep. I told Pa there was beans on the stove, if you two want to eat."

"Kathie!" Pa moved toward her again.

"I don't get it." Rusty shook his head. "Aunt Ellen was the same way. I asked

her for a cup of milk and she told me to get it myself. I told her I was coming over here for supper and she started laughing. And now Kathie is—"

"You might as well know," Kathie cut in. "There's not a woman in Tyler going to do any fancy cooking until the men vote the school money. There's going to be no cake and there aren't going to be any—" She looked away from Rusty. "—any kisses either." She didn't tell them about the dancing. They would find out about that at the dance.

Pa looked at Rusty and Rusty looked at Pa.

"Ain't you goin' to do anythin'?" Pa asked sharply. "She's your girl. Ain't you—"

"She's your daughter," Rusty said. "You going to let her get away with this?"

Kathie smiled sweetly at both of them, two sweetly. "Good night," she said, going to the stairs. "I hope you enjoy the—beans."

CHAPTER V

Night's Angry Brood

THE COURTHOUSE was draped with gay bunting and hung with bright lanterns for the dance. The benches had been pushed back to the walls. The fiddlers were tuning up and the room was crowded with men waiting to dance. The women were waiting too—but not to dance.

A long table had been set aside for refreshments: cakes and pies and punch. But there were no cakes, no pies. And the punchbowl was empty.

The men were on edge. It was easy for Kathie to sense the household battles that had been underway. Perhaps the men had been looking forward to this dance as a solution of those quarrels. Kathie could imagine the way their thoughts must have run: *"Give the girls a good time at the dance and they'll forget all this nonsense."*

They didn't know!

Vaughn came in with his sister. Kathie remarked to herself again on the woman's beauty and her youth. But Mildred's dress definitely was out of place for a dance in Tyler. It was too daring.

If the men's glances had been bullets, Vaughn would have been dropped in his tracks as he crossed the floor. Kathie smiled at him and he smiled back. He came over to her. "Everything seems to be arranged for the dance," he said smoothly. He held out his hand to Rusty. "Good evening, Collins. Quite a gala affair."

Rusty didn't take Vaughn's hand. Rusty didn't answer.

Vaughn made a tiny shrug and moved away.

Kathie turned on Rusty. "You didn't need to be rude."

"If he and I had been alone," Rusty snapped, "I'd have been more than rude."

Kathie knew she was alluringly beautiful in the simple red gown. She had worked on her hair to make it sparklingly attractive.

The other women were dressed in their best too. Even Aunt Ellen had taken her party dress out of the cedar chest to wear tonight. They intended to make the men feel keenly what they were missing.

The fiddles started. Rusty turned to her. "Dance?"

Kathie shook her head.

"Huh?"

"I'm not dancing," she said quietly. "None of us are. We came here to sit and listen to the music."

"What!" He swung around. His angry glance swept the others.

Arguments filled the room. The women sat. The fiddlers played a few bars more. The music stopped on a discordant note.

Triumph!

The men moved together. Their voices rose again and they argued among themselves. The women waited.

Suddenly the music started up. Startled, Kathie looked at the fiddlers. Dorothea Ellbe was standing there, at the end of the hall. Dorothea had ordered the music to play.

(Continued on page 82)

The Indian girl and Wildhorse stood by, as the two men tore at each other.

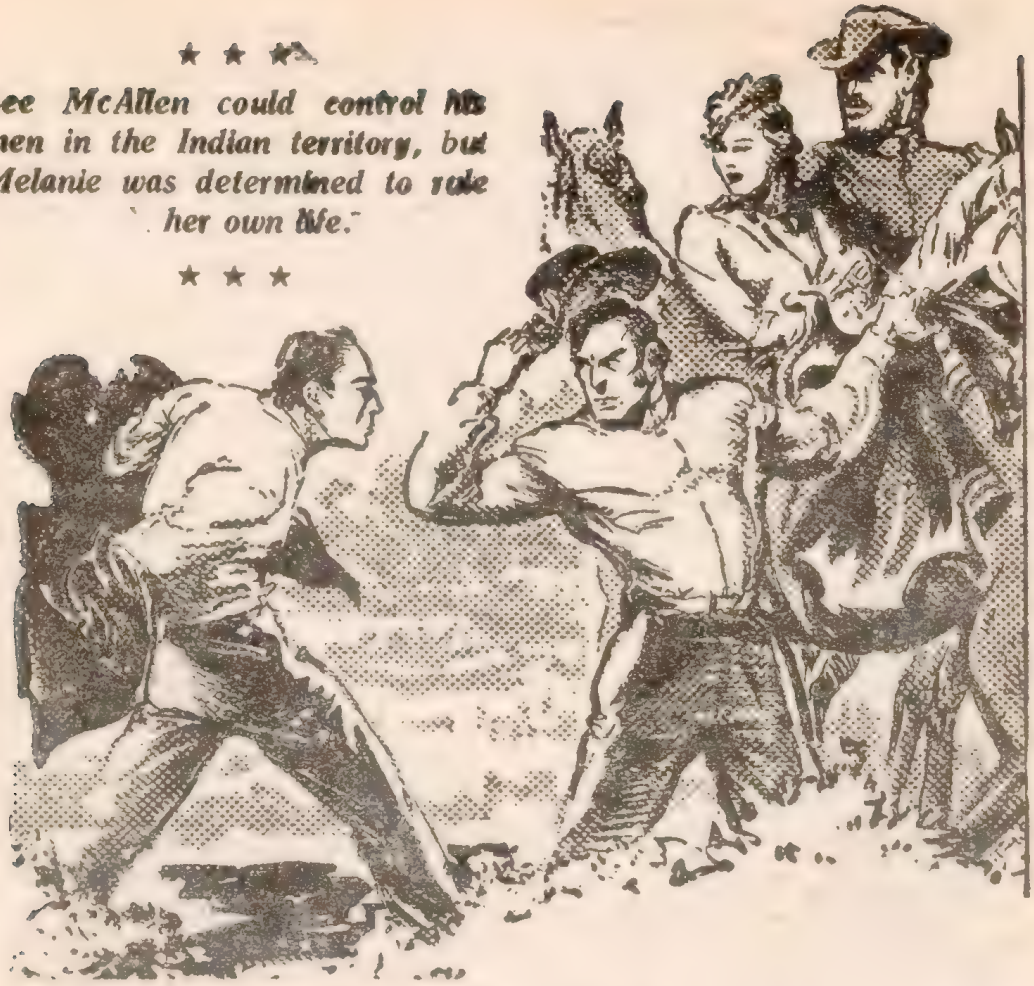
MELANIE woke with a start. It was barely daylight, but the fort bugler was sounding Call to Arms. There was an ominous sound in the silvery notes and Melanie shivered. Somewhere on the reservation there was trouble, and men would be riding out to face danger and probable death. Cort, too? Her breath had a knife-cutting edge at the thought.

Then she remembered, and relaxed. This was their wedding day—hers and Cort's. Surely that would provide exemption for Lieutenant Cortland Stevens. Someone else would be sent to lead the troopers on whatever field mission they must ride on. Cort had just gotten back, two days ago, from a grueling three-weeks' patrol, while Melanie waited impatiently for his return. There hadn't been time for their marriage then, since

★ ★ ★

Lee McAllen could control his men in the Indian territory, but Melanie was determined to rule her own life.

★ ★ ★



By ENNEN REAVES HALL

CAPTAIN CUPID PULLS HIS RANK

Melanie had reached the fort just the day before. Now, surely, not even that eagle-eyed commanding officer, Captain Lee McAllen, would be hard-hearted enough to order Cort out again. Though from the little she'd seen, and the more she'd heard, of the hard-boiled C. O. during her month at Ft. Arbuckle, Indian Territory, nothing Captain McAllen did would surprise her much.

A light knock sounded on her door, and the voice of her hostess, Polly Alford, called out: "Cort's waiting to see you, Mellie. He says to hurry."

So Cort would have to go, after all! Dismay filled Melanie, but none of it

showed in her face as she entered the parlor a few moments later and went into the arms of the impatient young officer waiting there.

"What's happened, Cort?" she asked breathlessly. She saw at once that he was furiously angry.

"It's that damned McAllen! Sending me out on a week's patrol, when he knew we'd planned to be married today. And just because somebody heard that Apaches have attacked a wagon train at Ford's Crossing on the Red River. That's a hundred miles from here, and no telling how far we'll have to chase the red devils. Provided there's any to chase."

Though sharing in his disappointment, Melanie tried to be consoling, as a trooper's wife should be. "But think of those poor people, Cort. Somebody must help them."

"There's half a dozen other officers he could send! I tell you, Mellie, he's sending me just to break up our wedding today. He's just that devilish mean."

His arms pulled her closer against him, and a note of desperation came into his voice. "I have to go, Mellie. I can't refuse to obey orders, though I think he wanted me to. But I want you to promise me something. Promise you'll wait right here for me, no matter how long I'm gone. And that you won't listen to anything anybody says to try to poison you against me."

MELLIE drew back to study the angry face so close to her own. Once again she was struck by the change in Cort's face, the petulant lines etched about his mouth, accenting its weakness, and the nervous, irritable mannerisms he didn't use to have. She reproached herself instantly for the thought. It was all due to the hard life he led. He was still the best-looking man she'd ever known, the one she had loved for all of her adult life. What if he did look and act like a spoiled boy at times?

She smiled at him warmly. "Of course I'll wait, silly. Haven't I been waiting for over two years? Another week will soon pass. And what do you think anyone could tell me to make me change my mind now?"

"Lies," he answered roughly. "Nothing but lies, Mellie. Remember that. McAllen himself hates me and . . ."

Through the window came the bugler's call again, and he broke off sharply. "I've got to go, Mellie. Kiss me goodbye and remember your promise."

His kiss was long and lingering, and filled with such sweet urgency that Melanie's whole being thrilled in warm response. Any girl would wait two years and travel a thousand miles to be kissed like that! Any girl could consider herself lucky to have a lover like Cort. All the little doubts that so often tormented Melanie were forgotten in the sweet intimacy of that moment, and she gave him freely of her lips and vowed again that she would wait for him forever if need be.

Watching him leave, her lips still tingling with his kiss, she told herself that she must never doubt Cort again. Surely no man could kiss a girl like that unless his whole heart was hers. It wasn't his fault that the waiting had been so long, and he must have found their separation as hard as she had. And now this further disappointment! A deep compassion welled up in Melanie, mingling with a rising resentment toward a hard-hearted captain who refused a man a break on his wedding day.

At breakfast, Lieutenant Lon Alford gave her an oddly sympathetic look which he obviously tried to disguise. His broad face wrinkled in a grin as he said, banteringly, "No wedding today, eh? Guess that means I'll get all the cake I want for once."

"That's a soldier's life for you," Polly put in hastily. "Can't even be sure of a man on his wedding day."

Melanie had the feeling that they were were trying to make things easier for her, but something in their attitude puzzled her. Polly Alford had been her girlhood friend, and when Melanie had written that she was coming to the post to marry Cort, Polly had insisted that she

share their own crowded quarters until after the wedding. They'd been grand to her, but Melanie had quickly discovered that no very warm friendship existed between the two officers. Could it be that Polly and Lon were the ones whom Cort had warned her against?

EYES on Lieutenant Alford's face, she asked slowly, "Lon, why didn't Captain McAllen send some other officer today? You, for instance?"

Lon Alford fidgeted a little, red creeping into his good-natured face. "I'm so danged fat, Mellie, the C. O. won't send me on field missions if he can help it. I don't know why come of the other officers couldn't go, but there must be reasons."

Polly had answered a knock on the door, and came back to say that an orderly had brought a request from Captain McAllen that Miss Melanie Ervin would do him the honor of coming to his office at her convenience.

Lon said lamely, "Guess he wants to apologize for stopping your wedding, Mellie."

Anger had been rising steadily in Melanie, and now it overflowed. "I'm not going," she said hotly. "Who does this Lee McAllen think he is, ordering people around like that? I'd like to tell him what I think of him . . ."

Lon Alford shrugged. "He's your future husband's C. O.," he reminded her, "and he's used to giving orders on this post. Lee McAllen's a hard man, Mellie, and no parlor lapdog. But I think you'll find him fair."

His placid attitude infuriated Mellie. "Do you call it fair to break up our wedding today? And was it fair to send a man out who's just returned from three-weeks' patrol? I don't think your blessed old captain could be fair if he tried, Lon. He's been pickled in vinegar so long, his heart's dried to chip . . ."

Lieutenant Alford reached for his campaign hat. "He's still the C. O.," he said cheerfully, and left.

Melanie was still fuming inwardly as she knocked on the door of Captain McAllen's office. At his gruff order to come in, she turned the knob and entered. He was busy at his desk, and she thought again, as she had thought each time she had seen the commanding officer, that he was the very coldest-looking of men. His straight, unsmiling mouth, thinly aristocratic nose, and cold, sharp eyes, gave his face the appearance of being moulded in ice. She thought, scornfully, that his heart must be ice-encased, too, and she felt a sudden, sharp desire to crack the hard surface and see what manner of man was beneath. Or was there just an efficient machine where his heart should be? It was said about the post that if Lee McAllen ever turned his stiff neck, it would be to look at a horse, never a woman. He had never married, she knew.

HE looked up, then rose and offered her a chair. She declined it curtly. "There can't be much you have to say to me, Captain McAllen. I suppose you want to pretend you're sorry about Lieutenant Stevens having to go out today."

Her direct attack caught him off guard. For once he appeared nervous. "Well, yes," he admitted. "I did want to apologize for interfering with your plans. But I'm sure you understand these emergencies arise."

Melanie's smile was as scathing as her voice. "I also understand that there are some half-dozen officers in this fort, Captain. Couldn't one of them have taken Cort's place? Or would that have been more than you could stand, seeing people in love and happy?"

She stopped, appalled at how much she'd said. And at the way he received her sharp words. Guilty color flooded his face, then receded quickly, leaving him oddly haggard looking. His lips tightened until his mouth was like a slash across his features, and she saw his hands grip the desk edge until the knuckles whitened.

"No," he said, and the words sounded as though wrung from him against his will. "I couldn't have stood that. I had to stop your wedding."

Melanie stared at him, unable to be-

lieve her ears. She hadn't expected him to admit it like that. Then Cort had been right! She took a step toward him and knew her eyes were blazing with anger, but she didn't care.

"Then you deliberately sent Cort off, so we couldn't be married! Oh, I didn't think that even you could be so despicable! I knew that you were cold and heartless and unfeeling, but I didn't think . . ."

Again his look stopped her. It was the look of a man being tortured, and he half raised on arm as though to stop the lashing of her angry voice. "Don't," he begged hoarsely. "Don't say that, Melanie. I'm not cold and unfeeling. I'm only a man desperately in love . . ."

He stopped, teeth clenched on his lips, and she knew he had said far more than he'd meant to. Knew, too, that she'd been wrong when she'd thought this man all ice. He was all fire now. There were flames in his eyes, and she felt the heat of them rushing all through her, making her tremble with a rising excitement. She waited, breathlessly, for him to say more. Instead, he turned aside, and disappointment flooded her. She couldn't resist goading him on.

"You, in love? I don't believe you, Captain McAllen. They say that you are a woman-hater, that you'd keep all women off the post if you could. I don't believe . . ."

He turned abruptly, and she saw that the last threads of his self-control had snapped. With something near a groan, he pulled her quickly into his arms and took her lips with his.

It was not a tender or a calculated kiss. His lips were awkward and rough against hers, and she thought her ribs would crack under the strain of his arms.

But there was passionate heart-hunger, of a lonely love-starved man, in the caress, and Melanie found herself thrilling to Lee McAllen's lips as she had never thrilled to Court Stevens! The realization gave rise to panic, and she jerked free, hating herself for that second of disloyalty to Cort, and hating still more the man who had inspired it.

HIS lips freed her but his arms didn't. "Do you believe it now, Melanie?" he asked unsteadily. "Do you think I know what love is like? I've dreamed of holding you like this ever since the first day I saw you. I'm crazy about you, and there's nothing I won't do to keep Cort Stevens from getting you."

The name of Cort restored some of Melanie's sanity. Raising her hand, she struck Lee McAllen across his face, the sharp sound echoing loud as thunder in the quiet room. He released her instantly and turned away, as though to escape the blazing anger in her eyes.

But he couldn't escape her voice, lashing out at him. "So, that's the sort of honor I've been hearing about ever since I came to the post! The vaunted honor of an officer and a gentleman—the kind of officer who will order a man to ride into danger and hardships such as he wouldn't face himself, so that he can make love to another man's girl behind his back! Oh, I didn't know a man could be so low!"

That brought him about to face her again. "I'm not that low," he said defensively. "It's just that I can't stand by and see you marry Cort Stevens when I know he's not fit to touch you."

Melanie remembered Cort's warning —"Don't listen when they lie about me, Mellie"—and her brown heat lifted proudly defiant. Hadn't she promised Cort?

"I will not listen to anything against Lieutenant Stevens, Captain McAllen," she said firmly. "And after the way you've acted, I wouldn't believe anything you said. I demand that you send an officer at once to relieve Cort, and that he be allowed to return to the post."

There was a challenge in her voice and he recognized it as such. "And if I don't?" he asked quietly, as all trace of emotion left his face. He was again the austere, unapproachable officer.

Melanie said resolutely: "If you don't, I will follow Cort myself, and all your garrison can't stop me. But before I leave, the whole post will hear of this scene. Do you want your men to know

The name of Cort restored some of Melanie's sanity. Raising her hand, she struck Lee McAllen across his face, the sharp sound echoing loud as thunder.

why you sent Cort out to chase a band of mythical Indians?"

That last was a shot in the dark, but she knew it struck home by the guilty flicker of his eyes. He lowered his head as though in study, and when he spoke, he sounded tired and defeated, and Melanie felt her anger melting, in spite of herself.

"Very well, Miss Ervin. I'll send a relief officer at once for Lieutenant Stevens."

AS she hurried out, not daring to look at him again, Melanie didn't feel at all triumphant. She only felt shamed and humiliated, remembering that brief second when she had responded to Lee McAllen's lips, feeling her heart still racing wildly because a man she disliked intensely had kissed her. How could she be so cheap and common, she asked herself scornfully. But the frightened, disturbed feeling that Lee McAllen had stirred in her remained.

It even remained during the next few busy hours, while Melanie went ahead with preparations for the ceremony which she was determined should take place the very hour of Cort's return. Lon had sent word to the chaplain to stand ready, and Polly finished icing the big, four-layered cake. Lon had looked frank amazement when he heard Melanie's news.

"First time I ever heard of McAllen countermanding an order. Sure you heard him right, Mellie? I wouldn't think he'd find a wedding that important, not even his own."

"It just proves he's got a heart," Polly put in. "I always thought all that crust was just on the outside, like my biscuit. Inside, he's soft as dough."

"But very sour dough," Melanie said tartly. "Even badly spoiled, I'd say." Polly's calculating look made her feel as though she'd said too much, and she knew that guilty color rushed to her face, but she couldn't stop it.

It was early afternoon when Cort got back. Watching by the window, Melanie saw the little procession coming, and an uncontrollable trembling seized her. She didn't know whether she wanted to laugh or to cry. Suddenly she wasn't sure of anything. The very hour of her wedding was here, and she was no longer sure she wanted to marry Cort Stevens. But that was crazy! Hadn't she traveled nearly a thousand miles, across hostile and dangerous frontier territory to marry him? Hadn't she dreamed of this hour, through two long and lonely years of waiting for Cort to send for her? It was just a natural nervousness, she told herself with steel control.

But her voice was a little unsteady as she called to her hostess, "He's here, Polly." And the whole troop has come back with him. Doesn't that prove your soft-hearted Captain McAllen was just being spiteful when he sent him out?"

Polly gave her another odd look. "I've found, Mellie, that most of us deserve what spite work we get. Mellie, I'd hate to see you make a terrible mistake. Are you sure . . ?"

Melanie jumped up quickly, hot resentment rising in her again. "I'm sure of Cort, if that's what you mean, Polly. And I won't listen to slander against him, not even from you!"

Polly said no more, but followed her into her room to help her dress. Adjusting the long, filmy veil, she stood off to admire.

"Mellie, you're really lovely!" she exclaimed rapturously. "Just look at yourself in the mirror if you don't believe me."

Melanie stared, wondering if that could really be herself. A stranger stared back at her—a stranger with a piquant, heart-shaped face framed in lacy tulle, and a softly curved figure draped in shimmering satin that seemed to accentuate every molded line. But was that fright in the big, solemn gray eyes, that should be starry with happiness? She tried smiling, but it was a tremulous effort and the result was no better.

"I'll wait in the parlor," she told Polly. "Cort will be here any moment now."

AN hour later she was still waiting. The chaplain and Polly were in the kitchen, drinking their third cup of tea, but Cort still had not come. Finally Lon come, his fat face creased with worry lines.

"Guess I bring you more bad news, Mellie. Looks like the wedding's off again. Cort's under arrest and confined to his quarters."

Mellie got to her feet, staring incredulously. "What on earth for?" she managed to say.

"Well," Lon scratched his bald spot

dubiously, "sounds like a trumped-up charge all right. It's serious enough—selling government property. Seems several of our horses have disappeared, and McAllen has the report that Cort sold two to—er, some Indians. He says they were his own, and I know he had two mares all right. It isn't likely to amount to anything, but it can delay your wedding. Cort might even have to go to Fort Smith for trial."

So Lee McAllen had tried another trick! And this one might even work, for Melanie knew how long it often took to unwind governmental red tape. Furious anger at the unfairness of it shook her and blazed from her eyes.

"Some more of Captain McAllen's dirty tricks!" she stormed. "But he can't do this to Cort! I won't let him!"

Gathering up her long skirts, she was out of the door like a whirlwind. A shimmering white whirlwind, the long veil whipping about her like dancing dust whorls. Straight across the parade ground she ran, heedless of the startled eyes of troopers, and burst unannounced into the commanding officer's headquarters.

Captain McAllen was alone, standing by the window as though waiting for her. He turned, at her stormy entrance, and the light that leaped into his eyes at sight of her, brought her up short. It was like slamming into a rock wall, and Melanie felt as though all the angry breath had been knocked out of her.

For a second, that seemed endless, they stared at each other. Then like a man in a trance, Lee McAllen moved to meet her, and Melanie thought he meant to kiss her again. Her heart pounded wildly at the thought, and she knew she should do something to stop him. Say something, or run. But she was like a person paralyzed. She could only wait, breathlessly, for she suddenly wanted that kiss as she had never wanted anything in her life. Wanted it, yet dreaded and feared it.

HE stopped, so close to her that she felt his breath moving the fringe of light curls against her cheek. But he didn't touch her, and she knew an odd mingling of disappointment and relief. But the storm of emotions raging in him echoed in his voice as he said, chokingly:

"You—you shouldn't have come again, tempting me like this. You're so beautiful, Melanie."

She moved back a step and the spell was broken. He was again her enemy, the man who was trying to outsmart her. She made a lash of her voice and was glad she could.

"I just came to tell you that your dirty trick won't work, Captain McAllen I'm going right now to Cort's quarters and we'll be married there. It will be just as legal."

"But hardly decent," he said coldly, and now it seemed the rock wall had suddenly moved between them. "I'm afraid you'll find, Miss Ervin, that the guard will not permit your entering the bachelor officers' quarters."

She knew he had scored again. Frustrated anger, more than disappointment, choked her voice and brought hot tears to her eyes.

"Oh, I hate you, Lee McAllen! You're low and tricky and unfair! You can do these things to Cort because you're his superior officer. But you know he never stole any government property."

"I am reliably informed that he either sold or gave away two horses to an Apache Indian. If the animals were his own, as he claims, he has only to prove the fact. I am only holding him for trial."

"You're holding him so we can't be married and you know it!" she accused hotly. "If he owned those horses, he has a right to dispose of them as he pleases, but proving it will take time."

Captain McAllen broke in on her tirade curtly. "Perhaps there's a way we can expedite things, Miss Ervin. Believe it or not, I have no desire to take unfair advantage of Lieutenant Stevens. The village where the Indian lives is only a short ride from here. I'll go there at once with Lieutenant Stevens and Lieutenant Alford. If the horses in question are really Stevens' mares, and not government

nags, then I'll withdraw all restrictions against your fiance. Is that fair?"

"Yes," Melanie faltered, feeling there was something to follow.

She was right. "There's one small condition attached," the officer went on. "Merely that you accompany us on the ride, so that you are fully informed of all the facts. Otherwise I shall postpone it until it suits my convenience."

Melanie bit her lips in indecision. "If you are up to more trickery," she began, but he interrupted her.

"Are you afraid to go, Miss Ervin? Afraid of what you might learn?"

Her head came up proudly. "No, I'm not. I knew perfectly well that Cort isn't a thief, just as you must know it. I'll gladly go with you. Just give me time to change into a riding habit."

WHEN she came out again, the three men were waiting for her, already mounted. An orderly held a horse with a side saddle, and moved to help her mount. Cort, white-faced and furiously angry, spurred to her side.

"Melanie! You can't go with us! I won't permit it!"

Captain McAllen's harsh voice answered for her before she could speak. "I must remind you, Lieutenant Stevens, that you are not giving orders on this post. Miss Ervin is going at my request, to see that you are dealt with fairly. Proceed at once."

In sullen silence Cort led the way. A few miles across open country, then another along a wooded trail, and the Indian village was in sight. Only then did Cort turn to speak. He was still pale with anger, but there was something of the look of a cornered animal in his eyes.

"See here, Captain McAllen," he almost begged, "isn't there a better way of settling this? I'll get word to the Indian to bring the mares to the fort tomorrow."

McAllen said coldly, "I prefer to do it this way, Lieutenant. Please proceed."

There was nothing Cort could do but ride on, though Melanie could see he was fuming. For the first time, doubt struck at her. Why was Cort so reluctant to clear himself in this most direct way? Why had he objected to her presence. He had said, 'Don't listen to lies about me,' but still didn't want Melanie to hear him exonerated. Something was wrong, and a sick dread of what might lie ahead filled her.

At the tepee where they finally stopped, a toothless old Indian sat smoking a pipe. Near by, a young Indian girl pounded corn into meal, between flat rocks. She flashed them only one quick glance, then went on with her work. Melanie thought that she made the loveliest picture she had ever seen, kneeling there in her fringed buckskin dress, long thick braids of black hair hanging like silken ropes across her breast.

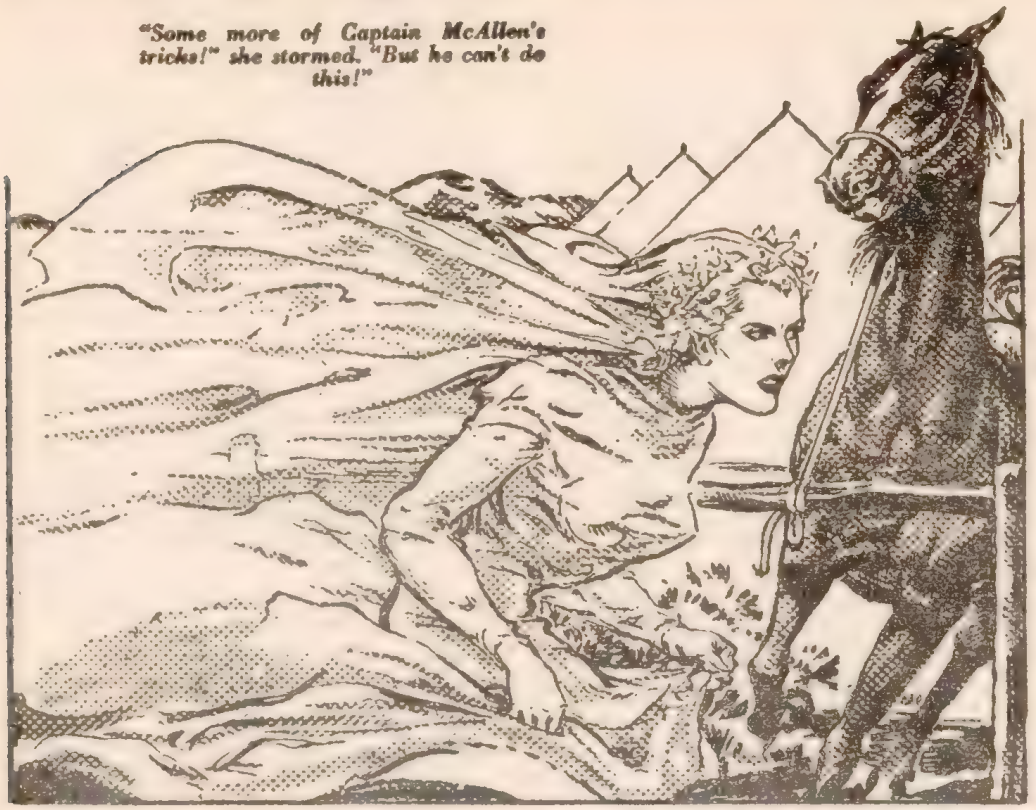
The old Indian welcomed them and solemnly offered McAllen his smelly pipe. Not until each of the three men had taken a quick draw, and the pipe was back in the Indian's mouth, did Captain McAllen state his errand. "We'd like to see the horses you received from Lieutenant Stevens, Wildhorse."

The Indian nodded and spoke to the girl. She walked away, and Melanie envied her natural grace. She returned in a few moments, leading two beautiful, matched mares. There was pride in the beady black eyes of the old Indian as he took out his pipe long enough to mutter a guttural, "You see? Good."

Captain McAllen nodded gravely. "Very good, Wildhorse. You must pay big price for them, eh?"

The Indian grinned broadly, plainly pleased because he had driven a sharp bargain. "No pay much." With a nod, he indicated the silent girl holding the mares, then flicked his eyes toward Stevens. "Soldier come first to visit with girl. Wildhorse don't like, but take horses. Now Wildhorse got horses both and girl too."

MELANIE'S eyes flashed to Cort's face, and she knew it was all horribly true. Guilt was written all over him. So that was why he hadn't wanted her to come! And that was why they had to



"Some more of Captain McAllen's tricks!" she stormed. "But he can't do this!"

come here—to expose his perfidy. Lee McAllen must have known the horses were his, to do with as he pleased. But he wanted Melanie to know about the Indian girl, and she wouldn't have believed him if he had tried to tell her. But she believed now, and the knowledge made her sharply sick. She stumbled as she turned blindly toward her horse, and was grateful for Lon's steady hand on her arm and his low, "Steady, girl. You can take it."

Behind her she heard Cort's voice, choked with anger. "Damn your tricky soul, McAllen. That's all you brought us here for, to make sure Melanie heard it. If you weren't my commanding officer I'd beat hell out of you!"

Melanie turned to see Lee McAllen calmly removing his tunic. He laid it across his saddle, then placed his hat on top of it. He turned to face the angry Cort, and said curtly:

"That takes care of that, Stevens. We're off the post and I'm out of uniform. Still want the job?"

Cort ripped out an oath, flung his own tunic aside and rushed McAllen like an angry bull. The Captain side stepped and parried the bone-crushing blow aimed for his jaw, then sent a short, left arm jab under Cort's guard that rocked the trooper like a cradle. Quickly recovering, Cort moved in closer, swinging hammer-like fists right and left.

McAllen took two heavy punches in his face, but he rolled his head and they glanced off harmlessly. Cort wasn't faring as well. Melanie saw blood oozing from his mouth, and his whole face was livid and bruised. Though as heavy as McAllen, he couldn't match him in quickness, and he was taking heavy punishment. He was winded, breathing in short, painful gasps, but McAllen still fought coolly, apparently untired. Melanie had the feeling that he was pulling his punches, that he could end the fight quickly if he tried. She began praying for him to end it. She was nauseated by the sight of Cort's face.

As though he'd heard her unspoken

thoughts, McAllen suddenly put all he had into a powerful swing, straight to Cort's jaw. The trooper crashed to the ground like a log, flat on his back, and didn't move. Thinking the fight ended, as did all of them, McAllen went to lean over Stevens.

That put him in perfect position for Stevens' foot to hit with full force. Without warning, the man on the ground swung up, to catch McAllen squarely in the groin. McAllen doubled up in pain and fell across the man he had downed.

Melanie saw the agony that retched McAllen, and the unfairness of the blow revolted her. In that moment she knew that she could never think of Cort Stevens again without feeling that same nauseating revulsion.

Cort rolled over and began an unmerciful beating of the defenseless McAllen. Lon Alford interfered, his broad face red with anger. With a shove of his big hands, he sent Cort sprawling. "Fight fair or quit!" he warned.

Getting painfully to his feet, McAllen registered the first signs of anger that Melanie had seen in him. Eyes narrowing dangerously, he told Stevens: "All right, you asked for it. Now come and get it."

The rest of the fight was more than Melanie could watch. She had to turn her eyes away from the sight of it but she couldn't close her ears against the sound of flesh striking tortured flesh, and she knew that time and again Cort's body struck the ground, got up and went down again. Until finally there was no sound to show that he moved, and she drew a sharp breath of relief, knowing the fight was over.

The Indian girl was bending over Cort, caring tenderly for his hurts. Her look of black hatred took in Melanie as well as McAllen, and Melanie felt a surge of pity as she turned away. Behind her she heard the old Indian's toothless chuckle.

"Wildhorse got girl, got horses. Now got soldier."

They rode off, leaving Cort there in the care of the Indians.

THEY had covered half the distance back to the post before Captain McAllen spoke to Melanie.

"It was a rotten scene to force upon you, Miss Ervin. But somebody had to let you know what sort Stevens is."

Remembering the Indian girl and the foul blow, Melanie knew that was true. Cort couldn't play fair or fight fair. Now she knew, with intuitive understanding, how hateful to Lee McAllen's nature was unfairness of any kind.

Melanie turned her head to look at the immobile face beside her. Dusk was mercifully shadowing the ugly bruises on it, leaving only the austere profile in outline. She wondered, feeling a quick singing in her veins, why she had thought him cold and harsh-looking just that morning. Why, he was handsome, in a way that Cort Stevens could never be. There was strength of character in his face, and under that self-imposed sternness he could be gentle as a woman.

Again Melanie saw the Indian girl crooning over Cort, and she knew in sudden understanding that Melanie Ervin and the primitive Indian were only a part of a long procession of women who would, or had, loved Cort Stevens. And all of them with apologies and excuses for his weaknesses. While this man beside her would scorn that kind of love. He'd want his woman to believe in him and be proud of him.

Now all the doubts that had tortured Melanie were vague as the shadows that stretched across the trail. Laughter bubbled to her lips.

"I was just thinking, Captain," she said demurely, "that you gave another reason this morning for wanting to stop my wedding. Remember?"

His hand reached over to take hers, and there was strength and tenderness in the firm grip—and promise.

"I'll never forget, Melanie. And I'll never let you forget. Will that earn my forgiveness?"

Melanie knew the answer to that. But having acquired new wisdom she said nothing. Only clung tightly to the strong hand holding hers.

Light My Way

Somewhere on the path of the hours,
From dawn till the set of sun,
I lost a handful of sunbeams
I wanted when day was done.

★

Somewhere on the trail of time,
From dusk till the dawn of day,
I missed a bundle of stargleams
I needed to light my way.

★

Nowhere on the roadway of dreams
Could those vanished rays be found;
Then, Love, you came through the shadows
That kept my spirit bound.

★

Enmeshed in the waves of your hair,
I saw my lost sunbeams play,
And your eyes were holding the stargleams
That forever will light my way.

BERTHA ADAMS BACKUS

Honeymoon Holdup

It was the blast of a gun, thunderous inside the bank building, that aroused Libby to action.

LIBBY was vaguely disappointed. Her fellow passengers, in the coach that rocked along the narrow gauge track north of Pocatello, were as completely civilized and almost as neatly dressed as most of the folks back in Illinois.

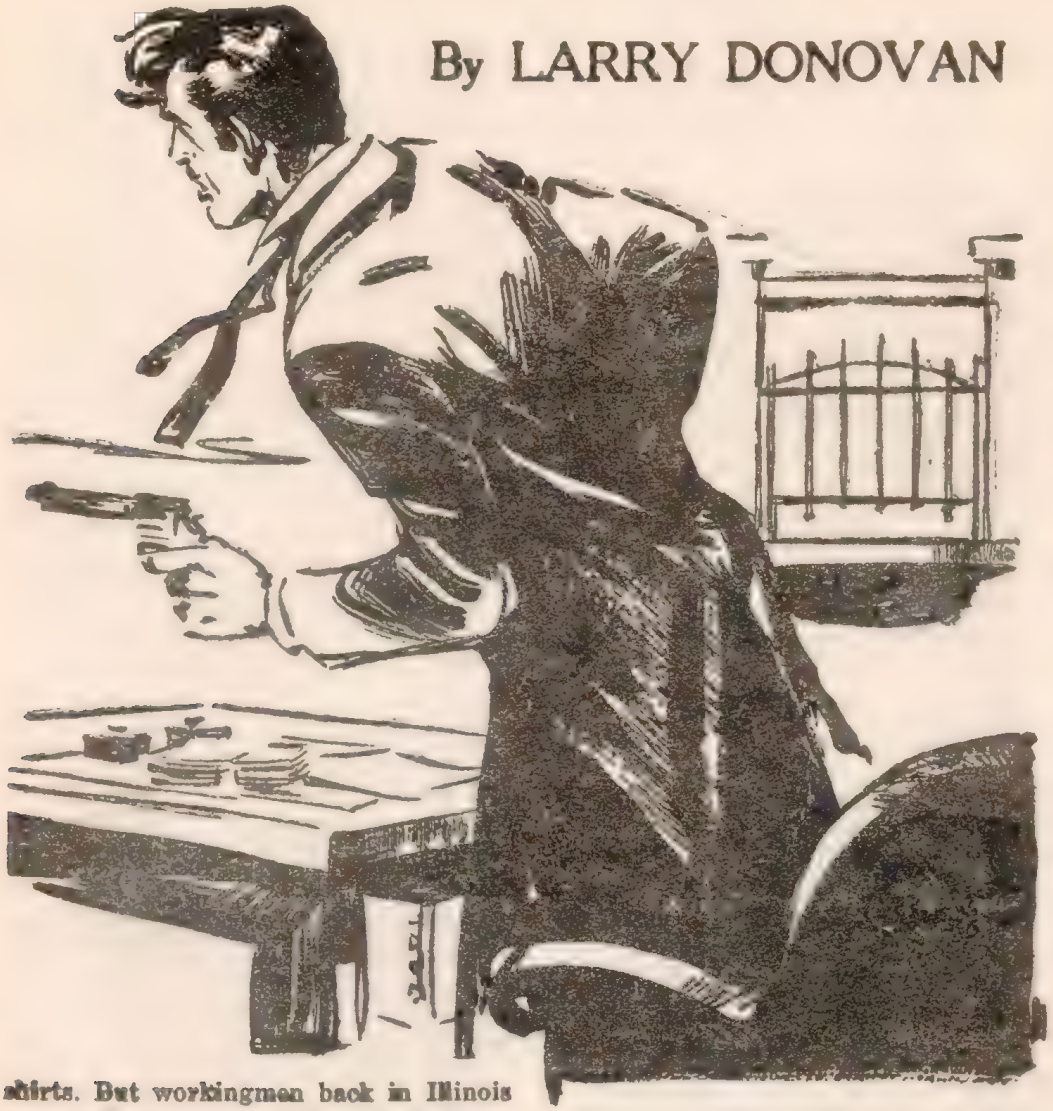
Libby glanced from the window. The flowing countryside of hills, green forests, and tumbling creeks, were as peaceful as the farmland of her girlhood. Bright sunlight converted occasional canyons into places of nothing more than deep and inviting coolness.

Having prepared herself for a wild and terrible country, Libby felt cheated. After the monotonous thousand-odd miles across the Great Staked Plains, flat and dry and dreary, she had expected something to keep alive the spark of adventurous hope that the persuasive *Man of the West* had kindled. For he had warned her that life out here could be rough for a woman, at the same time pledging himself to make it beautiful.

Well, a few men back at Pocatello wore rough clothes, mostly overalls and cotton

Libby went west to marry Arthur—and she found that her heart was wilder than the country!

By LARRY DONOVAN



shirts. But workingmen back in Illinois were fully as unmindful of their dress. The men in the train coach, and three elderly women, could have been from any small town back home.

Why, she hadn't seen one gun-toting gent. Neither on the train nor among the few riders she had seen on occasional ranches close to the railroad. And she was due to arrive in a few minutes at the town bearing the significant and lawless name of Lynchburg.

Nary a likkered cowhand appeared at any of the few small stations where the train stopped, his guns banging and his voice whooping defiance of law and order. It was discouraging, even shocking, after the hints given her of what her life would be with the *Man of the West.*

For Libby, known at the Illinois sanitarium as the youngest and prettiest head nurse the institution had ever risked having, had yielded to the plea of the *Man of the West,* and she was nearing the end of the long journey that was to change the name of Miss Elizabeth Williams.

Yes, Miss Williams was proof of the tradition that a patient always falls in love with his nurse. That was different,

she knew. But her amber eyes glinted with humor as she thought of this.

"Every nurse who falls for a good looking, eligible patient has the same idea," murmured Libby now. "But where else is any nurse to find her romance, or her security?"

She frowned over that word "security," and only added to her calm and attractive face, giving it the life that suggested she might have a temper with explosive possibilities. Libby was abruptly conscious that her slight scowl had changed a pair of casually inquisitive gray eyes to sudden and more intent speculation.

The steady, gray eyes were owned by a tall, lean-waisted man of probably twenty-eight or so, who had just walked into the coach and started to drop into the vacant seat ahead of Libby. The man's firm, wide mouth spread into a friendly grin that produced sun crinkles in the tanned skin at the corners of his eyes.

Libby looked quickly away, out of the window, but not far enough to miss that this stranger appeared to be the first real western specimen she had come upon. Worn and smelly bearskin chaps enclosed long legs, and blunt spurs made a jingling sound.

To be sure, a girl on her way to marry a Man of the West, having been very sure that he was all she wanted for future happiness—and security—a girl looking forward to surprising the man who waited, by arriving for her marriage and promised honeymoon a month ahead of the date set . . .

Such a girl had no right to acknowledge the friendly smile of another man, or to notice that his eyes were dark and intelligent, and that his hair was black and unruly and needed trimming.

Now the tall stranger seemed to think it would be better to seat himself beside Libby, instead of the wholly vacant, double seat ahead.

LIBBY moved a few inches nearer the window, purely by accident, to give the stranger more room. Then another man, similarly dressed, but with a gun hanging from a belt, strode into the car.

"Hiya, Brent!" called out the newcomer brusquely. "Wondered if you'd missed the train. Hopped on at the last stop an' didn't see you. Let's set here, boss."

Libby made out she hadn't noticed the man Brent in his move to sit down beside her. Good gracious! A girl shouldn't pick up chance acquaintances out here in Idaho, any more than back in Illinois.

Libby's pertly tilted nose became aware, then, of a good reason why she might be thankful that the man called Brent hadn't sat down beside her. There was a strong odor of horses and cows and sweaty clothes that was wafted back from the two men now in the seat ahead.

"A'right, Buck," spoke up Brent." "What's worryin' your mind to fetch you meetin' the train? I'd have seen you in Lynchburg in another twenty minutes. I'll put you straight, right off, on what you're wantin' to know. The Pocatello market was down, an' I'm some four thousan', two hund'ed short o' meetin' the note on the *Triangle.*"

Only one word impinged upon Libby's consciousness. *Triangle.*

Libby had heard that name several times. It was connected with some of the things that had stirred her blood and painted for her a romantic and glamorous picture of what she had been sure would be a rough, wild country where she'd be like earlier pioneer women she had read so much about.

But the man called Buck was speaking, and Libby listened shamelessly.

"Yeah, Brent, I'm knowin' about the Pocatello market," said Buck gloomily; then his voice sharpened, even if it was lowered. "It would have taken only a few short o' the bunch run off in the raid on our drive to have made up that much dinero."

"You get any line on the raiders, Buck?" Brent's tone was also lowered, but when a girl had been taught to listen to whispering patients, and heed the slightest sound, her hearing is acute.

"That's why I rode out an' hopped the train, boss," stated Buck. " 'Fore you left, there was only me, an' you knowed the

exact figure o' the bunch cut out in that raid. You didn't happen to mention that figure to anybody, didja, boss?"

"Nope," said Brent sharply. "Hadn't time. Left it to you to report the raid to Sheriff Blount, as if that'd do any good. Guessed you'd tell him how many cows we lost."

"That's the polecat in the brush I'm wantin' to tell you about, boss. I hadn't seen the sheriff. I'd sent the rest o' the boys back to the Triangle, an' none o' them could know for certain what we had rustled. But I heard it told, and I heard it exact. I was in the Two-Spot saloon, drinkin' alone an' not bein' noticed."

"Strangers come in, Buck?" questioned Brent. "Maybe one o' the raiders? What happened?"

"Nope, nary a stranger come in, an' nobody who'd have the guts to be an out-an'-out rustler, Brent. But I did hear Joe Billings told right out it was too damn' bad the Triangle had lost a hund'ed an' fifty-two cows outta its market drive."

Libby was thinking of the seeming coincidence of this dark-eyed man Brent owning the Triangle ranch. Her blood had quickened at the mention of a raid and rustlers. This made the apparent peacefulness of this country and its people somewhere deceptive.

But the Triangle ranch! It had come to mean much to Libby.

THE next words of the guarded conversation of the two men ahead came like a tight, freezing hand that gripped at Libby's heart.

"Who told Joe Billings, of the Two-Spot, that figure?" demanded Brent harshly. "You sure it wasn't somethin' like around a hund'ed an' fifty, instead of naming the rightful count?"

"I'm sure as sin, Boss," said Buck grimly. "An' it was a clean slip of a hombre who deals so sharp with figures, he prob'ly didn't think that we hadn't spread the word around. Art Fordyce spoke them figures the same as he would name a total sum when he's addin' interest and such at his bank."

Libby pressed one small hand to her

The strange man's firm, wide mouth spread into a friendly grin.

bosom, thinking that the sudden pounding of her heart could be heard all around. She could only guess what some of this might mean, but raiding and rustling meant stealing, she was sure of that much.

And Arthur Fordyce was the Man of the West to whom she was about to be married. All of this long journey she had been picturing the joyful surprise that would light up the handsome, dignified features of Arthur Fordyce, the Lynchburg banker, when she walked in upon him a month ahead of the time that had been set.

Lynchburg, with its sandy, wind-packed streets, lined with rows of maple trees, was another shocking disappointment to Libby. Its neat houses were painted and, instead of the false-fronted stores and saloons and such, the business buildings were of squarely framed logs.

Miss Elizabeth Williams herself appeared to be the most exciting episode in Lynchburg, in the dusk of this quiet evening. Her dainty person drew all eyes.

as her slightly lifted skirts flounced about her trim ankles.

Folks were friendly indeed, as Arthur Fordyce had told her they would be. Half a dozen pairs of hands helped with her luggage. She was installed in a room of the Red Horse Hotel, without having to lift a hand.

Only one thing bothered her. The friendly Brent, whose grin had almost won him a seat beside her, hurried off with the bulky man called Buck, and he hadn't even glanced in her direction. Libby prettied herself up and surveyed the results in a cracked mirror over the washbowl and pitcher.

"A fine state of affairs, when you've come halfway across America to the man you've chosen, to be troubling your mind over a rule and—and smelly cow rancher, Miss Elizabeth Williams," she said to her reflection. "The way they talked, you'd think Arthur had done something criminal because he happened to know how many cows were lost in a raid. No doubt that Brent or that gun-packing Buck talked all over the place, seeing that Buck admitted he had been drinking."

With which Libby dismissed the whole matter of Brent and Buck and their stolen cows, or tried to think that she had. But the name of the Triangle ranch was still sticking in her mind.

LOUD voices came through the door of a saloon that bore a sign telling this was the Two-Spot. Otherwise the street was quiet. And as Libby tripped past, her trim figure moving lightly in her fluffy petticoats, even the voices in the Two-Spot were stilled.

Libby pretended she did not see the bearded faces packed suddenly together at the top of the saloon's swinging doors. She had an idea that her attracting this sort of attention would not please Arthur.

Arthur Fordyce had been notable, during a short stay in the Illinois sanitarium, for his dignified reserve. Libby had been given the surprise of her life when Arthur had proposed. He had been so gravely serious about it, that Libby had been sure this was what she had been waiting for, fending all others away until she had reached the dangerously old-maidish age of twenty-three.

"You can always be sure you'll be the leading lady of Lynchburg and of Cobalt county," had been Arthur's assuring argument.

Libby had lived long enough to know for sure that love and security must go together. It had never occurred to Libby that perhaps her six years of listening to the ills of humankind might have made her a bit different from other young women who had enjoyed more carefree living.

One minute after she entered the Lynchburg bank building, where she found Arthur alone at his desk in the rear, Libby's confidence in her good judgment was reaffirmed.

"Elizabeth! Darling! It isn't you! No, it can't be possible!"

Arthur Fordyce had the deep voice of a man who speaks all the way from the heart. He was on his feet, his arms outheld, and coming toward Elizabeth with short, quick strides.

Arthur was a big man, and neatly trimmed sideburns added to his dignified bearing. Libby managed a little laugh, and Arthur's surprise did give him a funny look at first.

Libby said, as she had planned, "I happened to be riding out this way, and thought we might as well be married darling. I—"

But she stopped, because Arthur was holding her as any man would under the circumstances, and he was kissing her . . . Her surprise was as perfect as she had planned it, and her fiancé was certainly enthusiastic enough to bruise her lips with his mouth.

He held her away, looking at her.

"Lordy, but you're beautiful, Elizabeth!" he exclaimed, and she wondered why in the name of heaven she should suddenly be seeing a rough, young face with amused dark eyes and unruly hair that needed trimming. "I'll be the most envied man in Cobalt County, darling," went on Arthur. "You'll turn all heads. Just wait until you see the span of

matched bays I've picked out for our carriage—the devil! That buggy won't be here for a week yet."

Libby had already discovered she could turn all men's eyes; well, all but those of Brent of the Triangle, who had apparently forgotten all about her at the station. But after his first greeting and kiss, it seemed that Arthur was troubled by something.

"Don't think I'm not the happiest man in the world right now," he said, but his voice slowed with doubt, and his blue eyes squinted over some mental problem. "But it would have been better, I think, if you had dropped me a line. However, you must have put up at the hotel, the train being in for nearly an hour,—"

Arthur pulled out the gold watch, solidly anchored to his vest by a heavy gold chain, and scowled at it.

Libby didn't know why it seemed to grow suddenly darker and a chilling wind came through the door and touched her shoulders. However, she understood the regretful note in Arthur's voice.

"I understand, darling," she said lightly. "I'll bet I walked in on some important business appointment. I'll run along back to the hotel—"

The hard impact of striding boots in the doorway put a period to her speech. Arthur growled something that sounded like an oath, only it was under his breath. He moved between Libby and the newcomer.

"Go into the back room, darling," he said quickly. "I'll put off this business and I'll only be a minute."

Libby glanced around, and she was glad it was gloomy at the rear of the bank passageway. She was able to glide past Arthur and through the door of a small office, and she was sure that the man entering had not seen her or known that she was there.

"H'LO, Brent," greeted Arthur, his voice curt as he walked toward the man entering. "I was thinking we could put this off until tomorrow, say early in the morning."

The tall man with the dark, piercing eyes laughed, but it was with unpleasant sarcasm.

"Not a doubt but you'd put it off, Fordyce!" The rancher's voice was low, but his words were cutting. "Only I'm not putting off settling up on the Triangle note that falls due at midnight tonight."

Libby saw Arthur retreat a few steps as Brent strode toward him.

"If you're ready to settle, cash, I'll take it now of course," said Arthur, and there was no doubt of the hard mockery in his speech.

"I'm ready to settle, Fordyce," stated Brent. "Bring out the note. I'll count out your money."

Libby saw that Arthur was back of his desk. She saw Brent take a package of greenbacks from inside his shirt and slip off a rubber band.

Arthur's hand went to a desk drawer, but he withdrew it. Libby noticed that Brent's dark eyes followed that movement.

"Count out the ten-thousand, Brent, and you'll get your note," demanded Arthur, taking his hand from the desk drawer. "I want to see all of it."

Brent's action, then, was so fast, that Libby could scarcely be sure of what happened.

"You'll damn' well see all o' it, seein' you had the exact tally o' the beef you had rustled, Fordyce!" rasped Brent.

The men were of nearly equal height, but Fordyce was much the heavier. What happened was over too quickly for weight to count. Brent's fists became a blur that Libby could not follow, as he dropped his package of money on the desk.

Arthur lost his dignity enough to curse wildly, but he went down under the blows smashing into his face. For all of her hospital training, Libby couldn't seem to move. And she knew, somehow, it wasn't through fear of violence that she held back.

She was beginning to understand what Brent and his foreman, Buck, had been talking about on the train. If she hadn't already had the name of the Triangle in her mind and heart, it might have been different.

Before Arthur Fordyce could recover and regain his feet, Brent's strong hands had broken open the desk drawer. He riffed some papers and he tucked one inside his shirt.

"There's five thousan', eight hundred on the desk, Fordyce!"

Brent's voice held the coldness of cracking ice.

"You can collect the other four thousan', two hund'ed from the beef you had rustled. You've grabbed other spreads, but don't make any more move on the Triangle, or your luck'll run out."

The tall, erect figure of Brent was turned. His back straight and his head erect, as he walked without haste toward the street doorway.

LIBBY was trying to curb the sudden revulsion of feeling, and a strange emotional magnetism that seemed to be drawing her toward this man, Brent, whose voice and action had overwhelmed her with the man's driving power. She was watching the unruly black hair, outlined as Brent neared the doorway.

Arthur Fordyce had moved so quickly and silently, that Libby had not looked toward him. It was the blast of a gun, thunderous inside the bank building, that aroused the girl.

She saw Brent stagger, partly turn around, then seem to grope blindly for the door. And she saw Arthur Fordyce taking more careful aim for a second shot.

What whirlwind of madness sent her brain spinning, Libby could not understand. She hardly realized with what flashing movement she darted past Arthur and interposed herself between him and Brent.

"You coward! Don't you dare shoot again!" It was her own voice, crying out with impulsive fury.

"Elizabeth!" shouted Fordyce. "You fool! Come back! You saw it! I was held up! Come back, I say!"

But Libby was through the door. She reached Brent as he made it across the plank walk and pulled loose the tie rein of a pair of buckskin ponies hitched to a light, two-seated wagon, a buckboard.

Then Brent would have fallen, but Libby caught his arm, helped him to his feet, and managed to push him toward the vehicle.

"Come back, Elizabeth!" Fordyce shouted again. He was standing in the bank doorway.

Brent's shirt was soaked with blood near his throat. But he looked at Libby, and grinned as he spoke through clenched teeth.

"I'll make it, miss! Go back—don't mind—"

Libby had handled too many cases, not to know when a man was out on his feet, his eyes going vacant. But even after that, the driving power of Brent, of the Triangle, caused him to pull himself up and to fall partly across the buckboard seat.

The ponies were dancing, already starting, as Libby sprang all the way over Brent's slumped figure. She caught up the reins wrapped around the whipstock.

It was well, indeed, that Libby had become accustomed to emergencies, although never one quite like this. She had driven horses when a girl at home, but never such a rearing, kicking, explosive pair as suddenly jerked the buckboard into motion.

The furious voice of Arthur Fordyce reached her, for there was no doubt but that the banker meant his cries to be heard along the street.

"Holdup! Tom Brent stuck up the bank! He's kidnaped my—"

Libby lost the remainder of Fordyce's shouted alarm. Fordyce was shooting, but she didn't know or care if he was trying to kill her. Men were running into the street, but they dodged away from the running buckskins and the careening buckboard, yelling their amazement as they made out, in the dusk, that a girl was sawing desperately on the lines.

Libby Williams felt as if she were in another world. The houses of the town flew by, and the ponies were still running hard on an open road.

She knew that attracting this sort of attention wouldn't please Arthur.

She didn't know whether it was her despairing strength, luck, or her prayer, that pulled the ponies finally to a walk. For she was thinking only of the man still slumped across the seat beside her, with the stain of blood spreading on his shirt.

She ran the ponies into a field, stopped them, and turned to Brent. She grew faint and sick, she found his pulse so weak.

LIBBY breathed easier when she found that the bullet had passed all the way through Tom Brent's shoulder muscles, fracturing the clavicle, but missing the heart and vital arteries. Strips torn from one white petticoat served for blood-stopping plugs and a crude bandage.

She had pulled Brent into the bottom of the buckboard, when she heard the dreaded beat of hooves coming from the town through the darkness. Libby was on the seat, pulling the subdued and winded ponies back into the trail, when a lone horseman appeared.

The rider came close, striking a light. Libby saw the gleam of a gun at his belt.

"You can't take him to jail!" Her own voice didn't sound real. "He's seriously injured and must have a doctor and the best

of nursing. He's lost a lot of blood and he's suffering from shock."

She waited to see what would happen.

"He hasn't got a gun," she was saying. "He didn't have any when he was shot in the back. I won't let you take him."

Then she saw the rider's broad, bearded face as he spoke.

"For a gal that's been kidnaped, ma'am, you're sure actin' downright peculiar," drawled the rider. "Me? I'm Buck Hanley, ramrod o' the Triangle. I don't git all o' this, but there'll be a posse comin' as soon as Fordyce can find Sheriff Blount. So you can take my hoss an' high tail back to town, an' I'll drive Brent up to a line shack where he won't be found."

"Buck Hanley? Yes, I saw you on the train."

"A'right then, ma'am. Git back to town on my hoss, an' you won't be mixed up in this. I told Brent what'd happen, but he ain't the kind that listens to reason."

"I know," said Libby quietly. "And I—I ain't the kind that listens either. You're not taking him to what you call a line shack. He has to have careful nursing, so I'm taking him home if you'll show me the way. I've got to put him to bed and stay right there with him. If he dies—"

Her own voice broke. Her next words were high-pitched, defiant and desperate, although Libby couldn't quite have explained why.

"He won't die! I won't let him die!"

Buck Hanley struck more matches, looked at Libby's set, white face and the mass of shining hair that had tumbled down around her shoulders. Buck swallowed hard.

"You said, ma'am, you was puttin' Brent to bed? An, that you're stayin' with him? It ain't fittin'."

"Stop it, Mr. Hanley, and quit wasting time. We have to hurry. You'll help me undress him, an' I'm not leaving him until I'm sure he's going to live."

Libby started the ponies without further words. Buck Hanley was talking to himself as he rode close to the seat of the buckboard.

"Fordyce's gal—talks o' puttin' the boss to bed—that I should live to see such—"

"I hear you, Mr. Hanley," called out Libby. "I forgot to say that I'm a trained nurse. Now let's move faster. If a posse comes along, you start shooting. Mr. Brent didn't have any gun or I'd do some shooting too."

She heard Buck Hanley exclaim, "By damn! By damn! Lady, I'll sure enough start shootin' if it comes to that!"

Doc Lathrop nodded, after long hours of a nip-and-tuck fight with all the stimulants at his command. Libby could hear Buck Hanley pacing up and down outside Tom Brent's bedroom. Buck was a tough rooster, but he'd be a long time forgetting that Libby, this pretty girl from the East, had kept her word.

Buck had undressed Tom Brent and, with her help, got him to bed, where she had proceeded to dress his wound, then started bathing him with whiskey which she had demanded. Buck Hanley was keeping ears and eyes open, but Sheriff Blount and the posse, that Arthur Fordyce would undoubtedly demand, had not showed up.

NOW it was gray daylight, and Libby was watching the country doctor's eyes. When Doc Lathrop nodded and smiled a little, Libby drew such a deep breath of relief that it was almost like ecstatic pain.

"He'll do, thanks to you, Miss Williams," said Doc Lathrop. "I advise that you lie down and get some sleep. There'll be trouble, but the sheriff can't do more than put a deputy here. Brent can't be moved. What will I tell your—well, the man you're gonna marry, Miss Williams? Seein' Brent was unarmed an' shot in the back, you've saved your future husband from what might turn on him and become a charge of murder."

Libby knew at this moment what all of her years of waiting had been for. And it wasn't at all as she had intended. Arthur Fordyce, the banker, and security.

"There isn't any man I'm going to marry, doctor," said Libby quietly. Then her smile lighted her face, in spite of her

weariness. She looked the old doctor straight in the eyes.

"Isn't there some old adage, or something, that says the life of someone you help to save can belong to you?"

Doc Lathrop looked at Libby, and he glanced over at the bed. He saw that Tom Brent's dark eyes had opened, and that he was hearing all that was said.

"Tom Brent's a worthless, reckless scamp, who thinks he can take what he wants, Miss Williams," said the doctor gravely. "With Fordyce's influence in Lynchburg, Brent's like as not to spend the next ten years in state prison. Fordyce is a—well, what you call a solid and substantial citizen. He's taking this Triangle ranch from Brent, and what you say happened won't change it. A bank holdup's a holdup, so I'd advise you to get this headstrong rascal out of your mind."

Libby had never imagined such as this could happen to her. She smiled at Dr. Lathrop, turned and walked over to the bed. She wasn't quick enough to see Tom Brent close his eyes.

Never a word had passed between Tom Brent and her. Except for what he had said when he had been out on his feet, making it to the seat of the buckboard.

Libby glanced back at Dr. Lathrop, then leaned over and kissed Brent, her cool mouth finding his fevered lips. She had meant it to be casual, an answer to what Dr. Lathrop had said.

But it didn't work out that way. Tom Brent was every bit of the scamp and rascal the doctor had said. His unbandaged arm came up, suddenly, and went around Libby's shoulders. For a supposedly near-death patient, Brent found remarkable strength.

Libby put out her hands in protest, but they were suddenly without power to hold her back. Never had there been such a kiss. Brent held Libby's quivering body to him, compelling her to accept his unrestrained caress.

This was the kind of madness that came to silly, young girls. Not to Elizabeth Williams. You couldn't be crazily in love with any man who had been little better than coldly contemptuous of you on the train, and afterward at the station.

"Don't—you mustn't exert yourself—"

But she knew it was utterly useless, that her words were nothing but an old, familiar formula. It didn't apply at all, for Tom Brent talked, huskily, directly.

"I knew you was my woman, the minute I saw you," he said, and his arm tightened around her. "It was something that never happened before, and never could again. Maybe I'll go to jail, an' maybe I'll lose the Triangle, but that won't stop me loving you—and I ain't payin' for savin' my life either, darling—say, what's your name? I didn't—"

He was kissing her again, and she knew what he meant when he said, something that could happen only once in a lifetime.

"I know—Tom—darling, you'll have to be quiet—you're not losing the Triangle—and you're not going to jail—"

Libby didn't know that Doc Lathrop had slipped out quietly. Nor did she know that Buck Hanley was standing in the doorway, trying to speak, but on the verge of choking to death. Buck finally made the grade.

"Boss—boss," he got out. "They're comin'—the sheriff an' Fordyce an' a dozen townsmen—I've got the boys all set, an' we'll put up a fight—"

Libby knew her face was burning, but she faced Buck Hanley.

"No, Buck, there'll be no fighting," she said with cold calmness. "Tom, darling, don't you try to move. Buck, see that he stays in bed, if you have to hold him."

"Say! Come back!" Tom Brent was crying out, but Libby was out of the room.

SHE watched the posse riding up. And for the first time, she looked into the wonderful, broad valley, enclosed by the canyon walls that formed a Triangle. A swift water stream poured through the graze land, and Libby thought this was the most beautiful place in all the world.

Sheriff Blount was a mustached, scowling man with searching eyes and a rough, commanding voice. Beside the sheriff sat

(Continued on page 89)

Honky-Tonk Songbird

Sharon's search ended at Gold Junction, but she found Dave Winston waiting for her there, too.

THE BIG STAGE jolted and swayed as it rumbled over the bumpy road to Gold Junction, the newest boom camp in Yuba County. It was a tiresome, uncomfortable journey but, somehow, Sharon didn't mind at all. She sat very quietly, her fingers gripping the sides of the coach. A dainty figure in a bustled blue traveling gown and gray bonnet that sheltered light brown curls. She sat quietly and tried not to be too conscious of the man sit-

By
MARY
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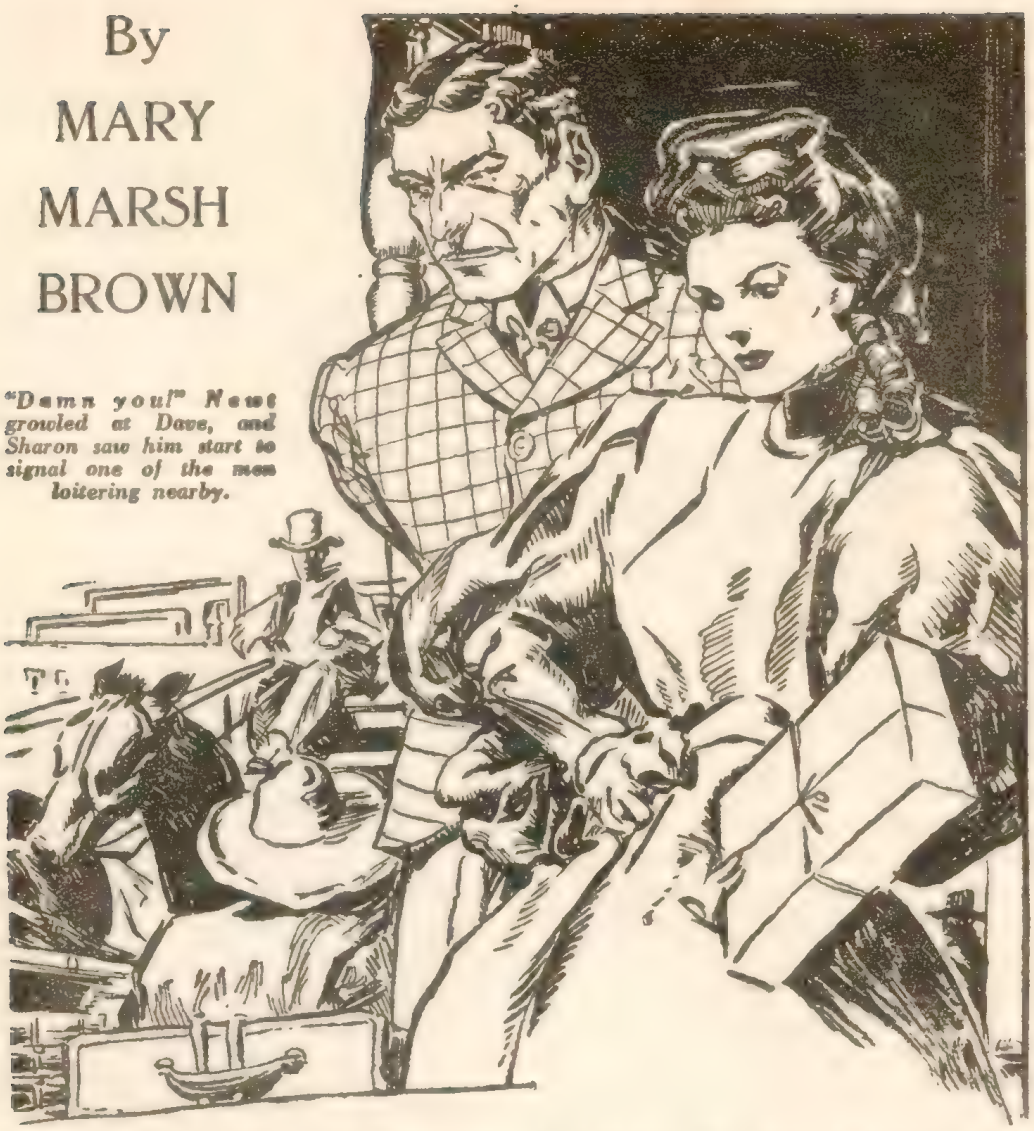


"Damn you!" Newt growled at Dave, and Sharon saw him start to signal one of the men loitering nearby.

ting opposite her—the only other passenger.

He'd gotten on at the last stop, and Sharon had caught a glimpse of a tall, rangy figure with blond hair and a lean face—of gray eyes that were like the smoke of campfires, and a wide mouth that could be tender and gentle. He was gazing at her, she knew, and, somehow, the warmth in his eyes made her feel strangely excited. She tried to ignore it—and couldn't—this breathless awareness that quivered between them.

And then, quite suddenly, he was leaning toward her and his smile seemed to light his whole face.

"I reckon this stage hasn't had such a passenger as you since it was built," he told her. "I'm Dave Winston, ma'am. Are you headin' for Gold Junction, too?"

For the first time, Sharon dared to meet his gaze. From under long black lashes she looked at him with eyes like zircons—the strange translucent blue of clear water running over white stones. She tried to tell herself that he was just being impertinent, but the honesty in the man's look, and the wild pounding of her own heart, smothered all protests.

"Yes, I am," she told him. "Gold Junction is one of the few places around here I haven't visited."

Dave Winston shook his blond head. "Reckon you haven't missed much. It's just like all the other gold camps in California—only a little worse." His

voice grew gentle. "You know, Miss, I don't believe you told me your name."

It was Sharon Reynolds, but for so long now she had been forced to use a substitute. "Sharon Hill," she murmured. "They call me the Song Bird."

Dave stared at her, his eyes lighting. "The Song Bird! You're not the famous honkytonk singer who goes all over the west! Why, they say there's somethin' low and husky in your voice that breaks a man's heart!"

She laughed softly, but praise from Dave was like warm sunshine. There was no denying the happiness that filled her. The thrill of knowing she'd be singing for Dave some time.

"I'll be looking for a job in Gold Junction," she told him. "Maybe you know the name of the biggest dance hall there?"

The lights died in his eyes, and Dave was suddenly very serious. "The stage stops right in front of it. Newt Kane's place—the Bald Eagle. But I'd hate to see you mixed up with that crowd!"

She knew a swift breathlessness over his concern for her. "Oh, I'm used to these people." Her voice was bright. "They're rough but not really bad."

"But you don't know!" Dave was suddenly fierce. "You don't know what's been goin' on!"

Her blue eyes widened and she leaned toward him. "What — what do you mean?"

His mouth tightened a little. "Somebody's hell-bent on runnin' the homesteaders off the land. We've had killings and fires! That's what I mean, Sharon. Somethin' might happen to you . . . . and it mustn't!"

The earnestness in his voice, the way he was gazing at her, left Sharon's throat dry.

"Nothing will," she told him faintly. "I've always been able to take care of myself."

CERTAINLY, she had been doing it for a year, she thought with a sudden twinge of weariness. For one year she had wandered over the West. Seeking a woman. A honkytonk dancer, guilty of a crime for which her widowed father, Amos Reynolds, was serving a life sentence in the Nevada prison.

"I only knew her as Linda"—her father had told her—"one of the dancers in the honkytonk. She had the blackest hair and the greenest eyes I'd ever seen —sorta took your breath. It was her laugh that spoiled her . . . . it was so shrill and highpitched. One night I takes her out to my claim—Slim Johnson's and mine. Slim gets drunk and tells her about the big clean-up we'd just made. She listens eager enough and then we come back."

Sharon knew the rest of the story. Amos Reynolds returned to the claim the next day to find Slim shot through the heart, and the gold stolen. He was arrested for the crime and, when he accused Linda of being guilty, the honkytonk owner swore that the girl hadn't left the dance hall at any time. Sharon's father was given a life-sentence and Linda vanished.

So that was why Sharon, who had always loved to sing, wandered from one honkytonk to another, seeking the dancer. She'd met many girls, but none of them had the black hair and green eyes and the shrill, high-pitched laugh her father had described. Sometimes she wondered if her search weren't hopeless.

Dave was looking at her, Sharon realized breathlessly, and there was smiling seriousness in his smoke-gray eyes.

"I've heard so much about the Song Bird," he said in a husky voice. "But now that I've met you, you're more lovely than anythin' I've ever dreamed of!"

For just a moment, Sharon stopped breathing. Many men had made love to her, laid their hearts at her feet, but none of them had won more than a smile, had awakened her interest. Yet now, under Dave's steady gaze, something was happening, something strange and overwhelming. It frightened her and thrilled her.

"Dave, do you make love to all the girls you meet in the coach?" she chided gently.

"Don't make fun of me, Sharon. It's just that I've never met a girl like you.

Let me be your friend . . . . and will you call on me if ever you need help? Will you promise me that much, Sharon?"

"I—I promise, Dave," she murmured.

BUT Dave wanted more than a promise of friendship—and Sharon knew it. He was gently drawing her toward him, and she couldn't resist. The warm lights in his eyes, the appeal of his voice. And then, his lips were on hers in a kiss of unbelievable rapture, with the whole world rocking from the sheer delight of it.

But suddenly Sharon remembered. She was the daughter of a man serving a life's sentence in prison. Until she cleared the name of Reynolds, she couldn't fall in love. She didn't dare. She couldn't drag a man like Dave under the disgrace that now covered her. She drew back, shaken.

"No, please, Dave!" she protested faintly. "I'm afraid we'll only hurt each other!"

The look on his face made her wince. "Then you didn't mean it, Sharon? You were just addin' another to your heart's collection. Is that it?"

She caught her breath, hurt that he should think such a thing. "You said you wanted to be my friend. You wouldn't talk that way if you really were!"

Dave's face set, but he said nothing. He didn't have a chance really, for in that moment the coach came to a jolting stop and the driver yelled loudly. They were in Gold Junction!

Sharon didn't remember much that happened after that. She seemed to be moving in a daze as she stepped out of the coach, to stand watching Dave collect her baggage which had been strapped on top. They were in front of the Bald Eagle, and she knew, without looking around, that Gold Junction was just another feverish camp. Drinking and gambling houses lining the streets —open day and night for miners who swarmed continuously from the shafts.

And then, as she stood there, the swinging door of the honkytonk flung

She saw only one man—Dave! He was at the bar with Lola, but he watched Sharon like a man hypnotized.

open, and a man in checkered coat and light trousers came out to the stage. He was tall and good looking, with dark hair and a mustache, and eyes like two bright coals.

"You're the Song Bird, aren't you?" he greeted Sharon suavely. "We heard you were comin'. I'm Newt Kane, owner of the Bald Eagle. Welcome to Gold Junction!" He bowed elaborately over her hand.

She didn't like the man. He was so typical of gold-camps, but she didn't let her voice betray her.

"Thank you. There's a job here for me then?"

Newt waved toward the building, the largest one there. "A job and quarters in the Bald Eagle—the best we have!"

Beside her, Sharon was conscious of Dave. The sudden flexing of his big body. "Sharon, you can't!" he protested. "This is no place for you!"

"You keep out o' this, Winston!" Newt growled. "The little lady knows what she wants!"

"She has a right to know she's goin' into a den of snakes!" Dave retorted.

SHARON hesitated, wondering if she were making a mistake. And as she stood there, a shrill laugh sounded inside the saloon, and a girl pushed her way through the door.

She wore a fluffy white dress, trimmed in red, and her shapely legs were encased in black silk stockings. She was small and pretty, in a brazen sort of way, with highly rouged cheeks and painted lips. But it was her hair and eyes that held Sharon's stunned fascination. Black hair and green eyes that took your breath! A honkytonk dancer with a shrill laugh! Sharon knew blinding exultation. It was like a miracle happening. After all this time—now, at last, her search was ending!

"I think I'd like to stay," she said firmly, and tried not to see the hurt disbelief that came into Dave's eyes.

The dancer joined them, and Sharon felt a little jealous stab when the girl slipped an arm through Dave's and leaned against him possessively.

"Hello, darlin'!" she said. "I've been missin' you terribly!"

Dave smiled down at the dancer and Sharon's world crumpled around her. She felt no triumph now. It was taken from her with that smile.

"Lola Peters—Sharon Hill, the Song Bird," Dave introduced them. "She's goin' to sing in the Bald Eagle," he added.

There was insolence in the way the girl looked Sharon up and down. "Goin' to put the dancers out of the picture, I suppose. Oh well!" She shrugged bare shoulders, raising those green eyes of hers to Dave's. "Where've you been keepin' yourself, honey?"

"Just away on business," he told her. "That's all."

"Which reminds me, Winston," Newt cut in. "Have you decided on my offer to buy your ranch? Four thousand in hard cash is a lot o' kale for a little land in this bench . . . . the way things are goin'!"

"You mean the way some of the homesteaders' houses have been burned," Dave came back. "The way the owners have been forced to sell out and quit . . . . those that won't bein' murdered!"

There was silence, and Sharon's eyes widened. She could almost forget Lola in that moment. The deadly tension between these two men held her breathless, fear-stricken.

Newt's face was like a snarl. "You'd better sell me your ranch, Winston. It's the best deal you'll ever get!"

"Why are you so hell-bent on buyin' me out?" Dave demanded.

"I've told you a dozen times!" the gambler snapped. "I own water rights in the hills above Gold Junction. If I can get all this bench along the Junction Creek, I'll invest in cattle."

"You're no cattleman and never were!" Dave retorted. "You're a tinhorn and that's all you'll ever be!"

"Damn you!" Newt growled, and Sharon saw him start to signal one of the men loitering nearby. A henchman who perhaps would put a bullet in Dave's back or knock him out! Terrified, Sharon caught his arm.

"I'd like to see my quarters and get into my costume," she told him desperately. "Shall we go in?"

Newt's hand dropped and he stared at her, his anger vanishing. "Of course," he said smoothly. "My apologies. From now on I'm givin' you all my attention, little Song Bird." He beckoned to a Mexican boy nearby. "Lopez! Bring in the lady's baggage."

SHARON looked at Dave, but there was no reassuring smile to tell her that he remembered those moments back in the coach. She turned away blindly, walked with Newt towards the saloon. Lola's voice trailed after them.

"Oh Dave, don't be so stubborn! Sell out to him so's we can go away together! You just have to take me out of this hellhole!"

Dave and Lola—who was really the Linda for whom she'd been searching! There was an ache in Sharon's heart, and she had to blink furiously to shut

back the tears that stung her eyes.

Newt led her through a side door, then up a flight of stairs and down a carpeted hall to a small, garishly furnished parlor with connecting bedroom.

"Nothin's too good for the Song Bird," he told Sharon as the Mexican put her baggage on a chair. He waited until the boy had gone, then came slowly toward her. He was smiling, but his black eyes were bold with desire.

"I heard you was pretty but I never reckoned on anythin' like this!" he exclaimed softly. Reaching out, he caught her hand, pressed it to his lips.

A wave of disgust swept through Sharon, but she couldn't antagonize him —not now! She forced a smile, urging the gambler gently, but firmly, toward the door.

"I'm tired," she pleaded. "I've had a long journey. Some other time, Newt." And before he could protest, she had pushed him out into the hall and closed the door.

There was no key, and she stood there, leaning her weight against the frame until the gambler's footsteps faded away. Then, with a sigh of utter weariness, she dropped into a chair.

Desperately, she wanted to keep her thoughts away from Dave and figure her own problem. She had found the girl who had murdered her father's partner, but, knowing Lola was the killer, and proving it, were two different things.

The knob turned, and Sharon sat up with a start as Lola sauntered into the room, smoking a cigarette. She looked at Sharon through half-closed green eyes.

"So you're the Song Bird!" Her tone was faintly mocking. "The gal the men go mad over!"

Sharon didn't answer. She hated this girl as she had never hated anyone in her life. She was the reason for everything—all the distress and misery. Her father—and now Dave!

"You and Dave come in on the same coach, didn't you?" Lola persisted.

"And what's wrong with that?" Sharon demanded.

"Oh, nothin'. Except I reckon you made a swift play for him!" the other girl sneered.

Sharon's head came up defiantly. "I don't know what you're talking about!"

The dancer laughed shrilly, and the sound of it made Sharon's nerves quiver. "You play dumb, don't you, honey? I saw you battin' your eyes at Dave and blushin' like a bride!"

Sharon was on her feet then, her eyes blazing. "How dare you talk to me this way!" she cried. "It's none of your business what I do!"

"I'm makin' it my business to tell you you're wastin' your time!" Lola snapped. "I've filed my claim on Dave Winston and don't you fergit it! We reckon on gettin' hitched!" And she turned, flung herself out of the room, slamming the door as she left.

Sharon stood there for a moment, numbed with pain. The man she loved, marrying this girl! And then, gradually, to heap fuel to her agony, came the soul-shattering realization that she couldn't expose Lola now even if she had the chance. It would mean betraying Dave himself! Destroying all that he held dear. With a sob, Sharon buried her face in her hands and wept like a child.

THE BALD EAGLE, with its red draperies and velvet carpet, with its long gold mirrors and bullet-scarred bar, was overflowing with hob-nailed miners. They stood or sat around tables, listening to the girl on the stage. The slender, blue-eyed girl in a simple, white ruffled dress that must have made most of the men think of their womenfolk back home. They listened, fascinated, by the throbbing, husky quality of her voice as she sang a love-ballad.

But Sharon was scarcely aware of the rapt, listening faces, nor did she notice Newt smiling at her, his eyes glistening. She saw only one man, Dave! He was at the bar with Lola, but he was watching Sharon like a man hypnotized. And it was to him that she was pouring out the anguish of her heart. She sang to Dave alone, and the sob in her voice held everyone spell-bound.

As she finished, there was an instant's

silence, then the dance hall was swept with a hurricane of applause and whistling. Sharon stood there for a moment, smiling automatically, but her eyes were on Dave—and all the hurt she'd ever known welled up inside her.

She couldn't bear it any longer. She turned and ran off the stage. But she didn't go upstairs—instead, Sharon fled to the side-door and out into the star-filled night. The cool wind caressed her face and she stood quietly for a moment. Her breath was a jagged sob in her throat, but she couldn't weep. She didn't dare. If once they came, her tears would never cease.

And then, footsteps sounded in back of her and she turned with a choked cry. It was Dave! He came toward her and, even in the darkness, she could see the golden lights in his eyes.

"Sharon!" he said softly. "I've been lookin' for you. You know, in there, when you were singin', I had a feelin' you were—were singin' to me!"

Helplessly, with her pulses throbbing, she looked up at him. "Because I love you!" her heart whispered. "I have no right to love you, but I do."

"I try to sing to everyone, Dave," she murmured.

"And that includes Newt, too, I reckon," Dave said unhappily. "Sharon, I guess I'll never understand why you'd work for that hombre."

She couldn't answer him. She could only stand there. Maybe it was her eyes, the clear blue of zircons that were shining, begging him to understand, for Dave reached out, gathered her to him with a fierceness that sang in her veins.

"Sharon, I have no business talkin' to you that way!" he groaned. "It's just—it's just that you're so sweet and lovely!" And his lips were on hers in a kiss that sent tiny flames through her.

Sharon forgot everything. There was only Dave's arms and this rapture that carried them on and on. It was all glory and bliss. It was the magic of stardust and the night's sighing wind. It was Heaven.

SANITY came slowly but inevitably. It came with despair, making Sharon rigid in Dave's arms.

"Don't!" she whimpered. "Don't pretend we can ever mean anything to each other, Dave . . . . when you—you're promised to another girl!"

He held her away from him, to look down into her eyes, frowning. "Another girl?"

"Lola told me you were going to be married." It was almost a whisper.

Dave's arms dropped to his sides. "Lola said that!" he breathed, and Sharon's heart gave a quick jerk of excited joy. She waited for him to tell her that Lola had lied. That she, alone, was the girl he loved. But Dave was silent. He didn't deny it, and Sharon knew a stinging humiliation that she had let him know her love for him.

"You remind me of the little boy who eats candy before supper!" she choked.

"Sharon, if I could only explain . . . !"

She couldn't bear any more. She didn't want explanations, when only his love would do. She flung back her head and her words came quietly.

"No, don't bother, Dave! I've been pretty blind. From the beginning I've tried to keep aloof from you. I wanted to spare you from something I thought would hurt you. It's too bad you didn't play fair, too!"

"I was playing fair! I meant everything I said, Sharon!" Dave would have taken her in his arms again, but Sharon pulled away, whipped by rising anger and hurt that he should still try to deceive her.

"That's too bad, Dave! Because I wasn't listening!"

Dave's chin set grimly and his eyes flashed, but he said nothing. Out in the street, two riders were leaving town, the plop of horses' hoofs receding into the distance.

The sounds caught Dave's attention and he stiffened. "Newt's henchmen!" he muttered. "And it's a starlit night with no moon! Maybe I can go gunnin' for a little justice!"

Sharon's anger vanished under the

swift fear that seized her. She caught his arm. "No! Oh, Dave, you may be killed! Stay here! Don't risk your life!"

But Dave only looked at her and laughed bitterly. "Isn't it a little late to start worryin' over me now, Sharon?" And before she could stop him or cry out, he slipped away into the darkness.

For endless moments Sharon stood there alone, shaken and miserable, full of dread for Dave and yet trying to convince herself that she was foolish to worry over him. Dave was going to marry Lola. It had just been Sharon's singing and the night's magic that had made him unfaithful to the dancer for a little while. Sharon's fingers curled at her sides. She couldn't tell Dave that Lola was a murderess. She couldn't tell anyone. But if she didn't expose the girl Dave loved, she'd never be able to clear her father's name!

SHARON finally dragged herself up to her rooms, thankful that she was through singing for the night. When she opened the door, Newt Kane's tall figure arose from a chair and came toward her.

"I've been waitin' to talk to you," he said suavely, his lips twisted into a smile. "I ain't had a chance to tell you what you mean to my place. You look like an angel and you sing like one!"

"That's nice," Sharon said faintly. But Newt was too distastefully close to her, and she moved toward the window.

"What's the matter?" Newt was irritated. "You're not tryin' to give me the brush-off?" He strode over to her, caught her hand. "Listen to me, honey. Newt Kane don't bother with all gals. I can give you everythin', Sharon. In another year, I reckon on takin' a million out o' these hills, and you're goin' to help me spend it! You and nobody else!"

"But I don't want your money!" Sharon protested. "I don't want anything from you, Newt!"

"You'll change your mind," he told her. "You're beautiful and you belong to me, Sharon!"

Newt was smiling, but she shrank away from him. Slowly, he backed her against the wall. "I'm crazy about you!" he whispered, and reaching out, caught her to him. Sharon tried to twist away from him, tried to avoid his mouth so close to her own.

Downstairs, the orchestra blared loudly, mingling with the noisy talk and laughter of the men. A scream, even a gun-shot, would be lost in that confusion.

"Dave! Dave!" Sharon cried. But he wasn't there. He couldn't help her.

"So you're in love with that jasper!" Newt muttered. "Well, I've fixed it so's you won't be seein' him ag'in. I'm the one who's goin' to have you—not Winston!"

That meant Dave had been trapped by the henchmen! Sharon felt strength leave—and Newt pulled her to him. His mouth crushed hers in a sickening, bruising kiss.

Sharon's fists came up to flay against him. She didn't hear the door open. She didn't know anyone was near, until Lola's shrill voice suddenly echoed through the room.

"You two-timin' snake! Newt Kane, you can't do this to me!"

Sharon fell back as the gambler released her, whirling on Lola, who stood near the door. The dancer's green eyes blazed with fury as she advanced on him.

"So I can lie and steal and murder for you!" she cried. "And what do you do! You make love to this song bird behind my back!"

"Get out o' here, you she-devil!" Newt gritted.

"Sure I'll get! But I'm takin' a piece of your yellow-livered heart with me!"

She pulled a dagger from under her dress, the blade rising. Newt mouthed an oath and lunged forward, pinning her arms. His fingers clamped crushingly on the dancer's wrist, and he seized the hilt of the dagger with his right hand.

It wasn't until Sharon saw the gambler turning the sharp blade toward

Lola, that she realized his intention to really kill the other girl.

"Stop!" she screamed, and flung herself on Newt, clawing for his arm. But it was too late. Already the dagger was plunging into the dancer's breast. Lola swayed for a moment, then crumpled to the floor.

IT had happened that quickly. "You've killed her!" Sharon sobbed. Her blood was like ice and she had lost all feeling.

"Come on and quit moanin'!" Newt seized her arm. "You and I are gettin' out o' here! Let someone else find the body."

"You're not going to leave her here to die!"

But Newt only dragged her from the room. She fought him like a tigress and he cursed her. But they didn't get very far. Two men met them in the hallway and Sharon gave a wild sob.

Dave was one of them! He stood there, gun in hand. "Take your dirty paws off Sharon or I'll plug you!"

"Winston!" Newt croaked the name, staring at him in disbelief.

Dave laughed mockingly. "Surprised, aren't you, Kane? You and Lola couldn't force me to sell, so you sent your men to burn down my shack tonight and lay in ambush for me. Well, neither of 'em will do any work for you for a spell. I got the truth out of 'em first. That you're gettin' this land so's you can pipe water down from the hills and do ground sluicin'. You were aimin' to take a fortune out of this bench! You were goin' to steal my land and now . . . . you're tryin' to force yourself on Sharon!" His finger cocked on the trigger.

Newt's face had gone white, and he shrank away from the weapon. A coward now—a man who could only fight women and who depended on others to do his evil bidding.

"I didn't mean nothin'!" he whined. "Don't—don't shoot!"

"I brought the sheriff with me," Dave told him. "You can explain to him just what you did mean. Sharon, are you all right?"

"Yes, but Dave—Lola! Newt stabbed her! She's in my room!"

Lola was still breathing when they lifted her onto the sofa. As they tried to staunch the blood that seeped from her wound, she opened her eyes faintly. Only a wounded girl now—though she had confessed to murder.

Sharon bent her head very close. "Lola! Listen to me!" she sobbed. "I'm Sharon Reynolds. My father's serving a life sentence for Slim Johnson's murder. You said you killed for Newt. Was that the murder my father's in prison for?" Then, as Lola nodded weakly, "If I write out a confession, will you sign it?"

The girl gasped. "Might as well. I'm all washed up anyway." She drew a breath. "You tried to save my life, Sharon . . . . and I want you to know the rest of it—about Dave, I mean. When I saw he'd tumbled for you and might spoil any of Newt's plans, I lied to him. I told Dave if he didn't take me away, I —I'd kill myself. Dave never loved me . . . ." That was all she could say.

The big stage jolted and swayed, but Sharon didn't mind. She was being held tightly in Dave's arms and his lips were brushing her face and eyes. For the first time she was knowing true happiness and peace.

"Poor Lola," she sighed. "She was so young to die."

"It's better. She never had a chance and it's cleared your father's name, darlin'."

Sharon nodded and a thrill warmed her. Even now, they were riding to meet her father, and then she and Dave were to be married.

Dave's mouth was close to her ear. "I reckon this stage hasn't had such a passenger as you since it was built. I'm Dave Winston, ma'am. Are you headin' my way too?"

She looked up at him, her blue eyes filled with tenderness and joy.

"For heaven, darling!" she whispered, and gave him her lips in a kiss that would last forever.

Haunting the Right Spots

By HOWARD PECK

ALTHOUGH it is an established scientific fact that, for every 500 female babies born, some 574 male babies see the light of day, for some strange reason there will always be a shortage of eligible men ready and willing to take marriage vows as far as ever so many of the women are concerned. For it is a peculiar quirk of female reasoning that, unless there are at least three men available for every altar-bound girl, there is great cause for concern. As a result, therefore, prewar days found large stag lines always in attendance at most society functions, and very few parties were considered a success unless at least one extra male had been invited.

But, as things sometimes do, the war came along and spoiled the fixed ratio, and then, almost overnight, where before there had been a man surplus there was now a woman surplus. Things were coming to such a pretty pass that in some sections of the country there were now as many as three and four women to every available man out of uniform. Of course, such a state of affairs could mean, for the great majority of girls, only that they were now consigned to the men of the "either too young or too old" class. These left-overs have been of little consolation to the girls, with the result that many of them have been staying home through the long evenings, either with a good book or with pen in hand, writing to their Joe in the service.

THERE is some slight comfort for all our lonely girls, however, in the fact that in such places as South Africa and Alaska, men are still greatly in the majority. As a matter of fact, so favorable is the ratio in these places that there is hardly an old maid in all South Africa or Alaska. In fact, an old maid is considered so rare that her presence and eligibility are known for miles around.

But American girls have always demonstrated their ingenuity in the past, and they are not failing us now. It seems that in Alaska, the current ratio of men to women is something like eighteen to one. Accordingly, many girls who used to sit by the fire dreaming of the old apple tree in the springtime have deserted their old home towns for jobs on the various construction projects now in progress in Alaska. They are there now in the hundreds, helping Uncle Sam with his industrial work, and the old-timers say it is a real pleasure to see them brightening up the scenery around Fort St. John and Dawson Creek.

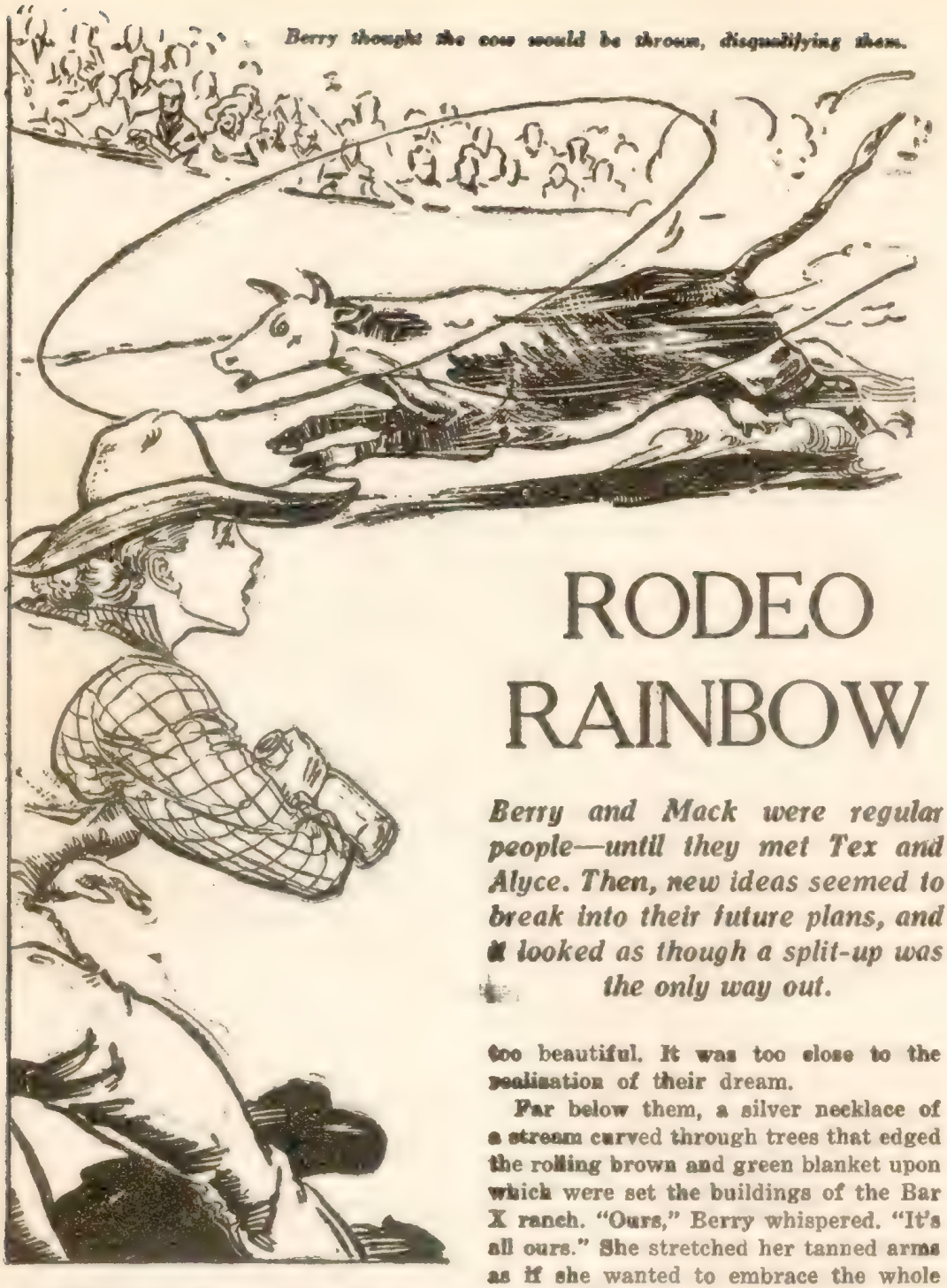
So appreciated are these recent female arrivals that, whenever there is a Saturday-night dance at one of the few ballrooms, the billboards advertising the great event will usually read:

WANTED: 1000 WOMEN TO DANCE AT JOE'S BALLROOM

ADMISSION: COUPLES $2.00 STAGS $3.00

STAG LADIES PAID $1.00 FOR THEIR ATTENDANCE

Yes, folks, you read it right. Girls are being paid one dollar a head to attend these Saturday-night dances in Alaska. Under such conditions, it should be no trouble at all for an enterprising young lady to snare herself a husband.



Berry thought the cow would be thrown, disqualifying them.

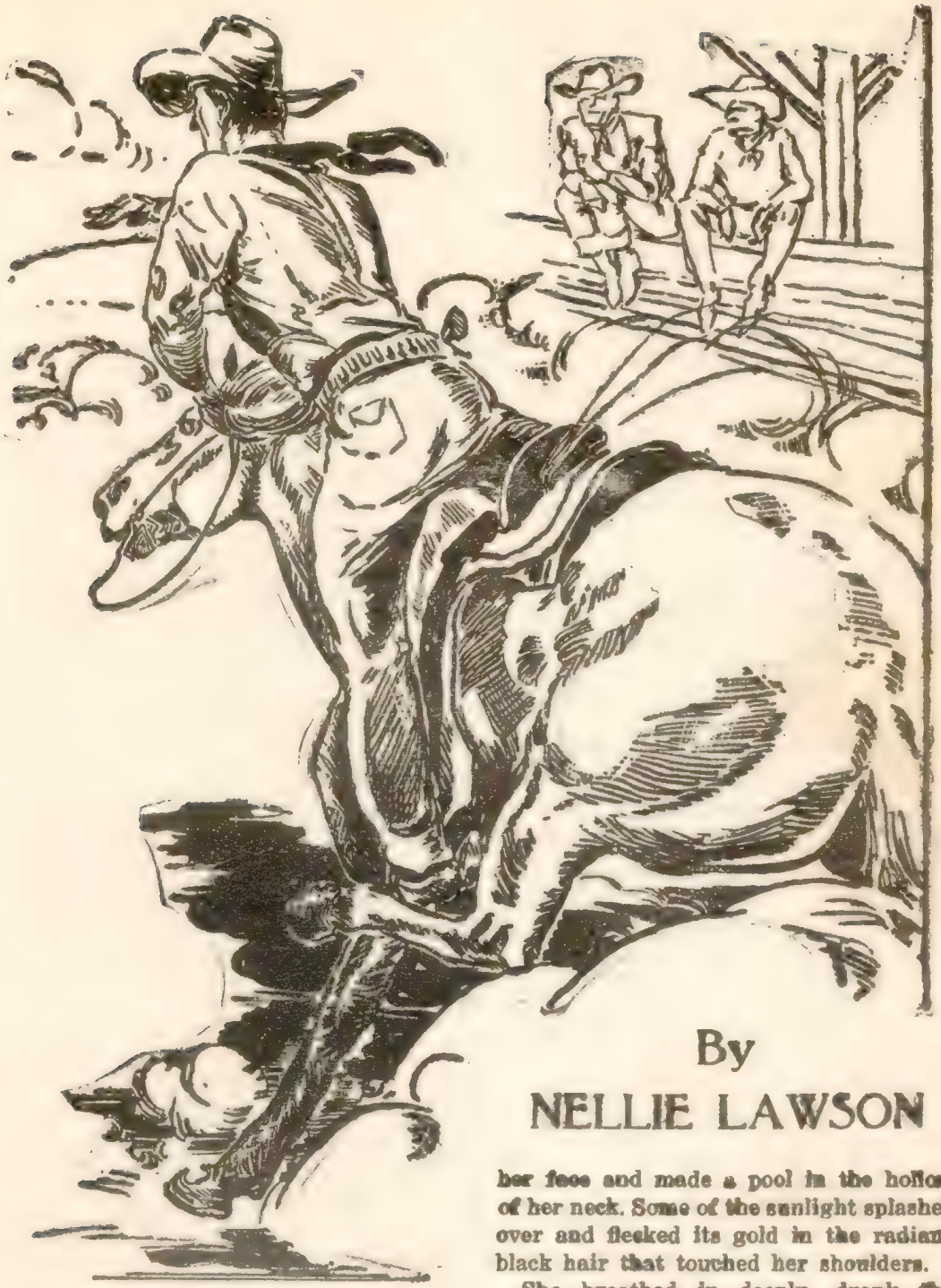
RODEO RAINBOW

Berry and Mack were regular people—until they met Tex and Alyce. Then, new ideas seemed to break into their future plans, and it looked as though a split-up was the only way out.

STEALING, this morning, from the future, Berry Hayden rode with Mack Butler along the brush-crowded trail from Tyler, up through the greening hills to High Point. Dismounting there, they stood together, Mack's arm around her, holding her tightly. For a moment, neither of them talked. It was too beautiful. It was too close to the realization of their dream.

Far below them, a silver necklace of a stream curved through trees that edged the rolling brown and green blanket upon which were set the buildings of the Bar X ranch. "Ours," Berry whispered. "It's all ours." She stretched her tanned arms as if she wanted to embrace the whole valley within them.

"We shouldn't rightly call it ours yet." Mack sat down, leaning his broad back against a flat rock. He tilted his dust-powdered hat an inch lower, so the wide brim kept the full sun out of his serious blue eyes. "We've paid down on it, but we've got to finish paying 'fore it's ours."



By
NELLIE LAWSON

He sighed. "Sometimes I wonder—giving up everything—"

"Monday morning, we'll have the papers." Berry lowered herself beside him, slipped her hand under his arm.

The rock was hot against her back. The good warmth of it filled her. She tilted back her head so the sun caught her face and made a pool in the hollow of her neck. Some of the sunlight splashed over and flecked its gold in the radiant black hair that touched her shoulders.

She breathed in deeply, drank the freshness of the air and the soft scent of pine, carried by the whisper of a breeze. Next to them, their ground-reined horses drowsily cropped the brown grass. It was so peaceful here. So good to be this close to their dream.

Seven months they had worked together for this, Berry driving Mack all

the time, keeping his eyes set on their goal. Moving from one rodeo town to another, week after week. Riding, working every minute, fighting for the prizes they could bank to get married and buy the Bar X ranch. There had been no rest for either of them, no relaxation. This was their goal. Every minute and every cent had gone toward it.

They were weary, tired, sore from the poundings of constant competition in the rodeo arena. Sometimes their nerves had been on edge. Sometimes they had been close to abandoning their dream.

But it was worth it now. She opened her eyes, looking at Mack. Did he think it was worth it too? Was he satisfied now? Slowly, she smiled. Mack was asleep.

HE'D had so little rest, so little fun and laughter. It had been a grim point-counting, prize-minded struggle all the way. At times she had bossed him. Other times they had quarreled. But if Berry's hand was stern, it was because her heart was steady and her mind was set on making more of Mack and Berry than a team of rodeo tramps.

Berry put her head on Mack's shoulder and closed her eyes. They could take their hour of rest. There was time yet before the first afternoon events at Tyler.

He stirred, as her hair touched his cheek. He squeezed his arm around her for a moment and sighed. "We'd better head back. Have to get my shirt pressed and I need a haircut."

Berry teased, "Prettying up for Alyce Holling?"

"'Course not. I just reckon I might clean up a bit." He smiled. "You sound jealous."

"Me?" Berry's laugh was a note too quick. Silly, of course, but it had hurt yesterday, the way Mack had whistled at the rodeo poster of glamorous Alyce Holling. Berry had passed it off by whistling at the companion picture of Tex Mawson, the singing cowboy film hero, who was coming to Tyler from Hollywood with Alyce.

"I still don't like the idea," Berry said now, swinging up to the saddle. "I don't see why they have to bring movie stars here. It's—like making a circus of the rodeo."

"They'll draw a bigger gate." Mack nudged his chestnut stallion forward. "More prize money for us."

The wooden stands were packed to sagging for the afternoon events. The cheering, foot-stamping crowd gave Alyce Holling and Tex Mawson an ovation, as the film stars led the parade around the dusty arena. Berry and Mack rode behind them.

Alyce and Tex dismounted and went to center boxes. Alyce was soft. *Like a hothouse flower.* But lovely, Berry admitted. Tex was older than he looked on the screen, gray hair at his temples. Pasted-on smile. But masculine and handsome.

Mack drew a range horse in the bareback bronc-riding event. It was a wild, snorting animal that gave a good performance and let Mack make the most of it, plunging dangerously close to the arena fence with him while Mack gripped the rope in one hand. Berry knew the three judges would give Mack and the animal a high percentage.

As the horn sounded, he slid from the animal, in front of the center box. Getting to his feet, Mack brushed the dust with his hand and limped slightly, heading toward the fence.

Grandstanding. It went over well with the crowd, that fake limping, but it wouldn't influence the judges. Then Berry saw the reason: Alyce Holling, clapping her hands wildly for Mack.

He bowed low, swept off his hat, and grinned up at Alyce. Berry turned her back, scuffed her boot in the dust. Her fingers gripped the rough, whitewashed board of the gate as she waited for Mack to come over. She swung around. "That little act didn't earn us anything."

"Gave the crowd a kick." He frowned. "What's got you het up?"

"It was cheap."

His face went red under the tan. "Gosh, Berry. . . . Can't I have any fun?"

THEY took their places, Mack gathering up his lariat, and Berry ready with the bottle, as the loudspeaker announced the wild cow-milking contest.

The flag dropped. The rope uncoiled, fell into place about the neck of the racing cow, jerked taut. For a second, Berry thought the cow would be thrown, disqualifying them. Mack's nerves *were* on edge. But the snorting animal didn't fall. Acting the part of the mugger, Mack held the cow while Berry squeezed the precious white stream into the bottle.

Berry raced across the arena to the white stripe, looking over her shoulder once, to make sure that Mack removed the rope from the cow before she crossed the judges' finish line. She watched the warm milk poured from the bottle to the dirt, glanced at the black time-clock above the chutes. They were in the money. She waited for Mack's approval. He stopped on the way back, to lean over the grandstand rail and talk to Alyce and Tex.

In the middle spot, Alyce and Tex took to the arena to sing *Golden Girl,* the hit tune of their latest picture. Alyce hugged the microphone like she had her arms around a man. Watching, Mack smiled and told Berry: "The gal's got a right smart voice."

"Voice?"

Mack frowned, looked away.

After the closing parade, Berry and Mack dismounted next to Alyce and Tex. Alyce gave Mack a final fadeout smile, straight from the screen. "You're plenty good, cowboy." Her voice was husky, the way it was when she sang. Her glance swept briefly over Berry. "Why don't we all go some place and have a drink? That heat—exhausted me."

"Sorry." Berry shook her head. "I want to check the scoring."

"How about you?"

Mack's eyes asked Berry's permission. *Just for the fun of it. You won't mind?* Berry made a tiny shrug. "All right," Mack told Alyce. "I'll have a short one with you and Tex."

"Count me out," Tex said. "I'm tired."

Mack and Alyce went off together. Berry turned to the gate. Tex stopped and watched them. "Alyce will have her fun." He said it half to himself.

Berry gave him part of a smile. "You sound bitter."

Tex shifted his glance, gave her back the smile, shook his head slightly. "I should be used to it by now." He looked Berry over again. "Mind if I go with you? I'd like to see how they do the scoring."

She frowned slightly. "If you want to."

Checking over the points on the official score sheets in the judges' stand, Berry answered Tex's questions. When she finished, he asked: "How about coffee? Something to eat? I'm going to stop for something on the way to the hotel anyhow."

Berry nodded slowly. "All right. . . . I am hungry."

THEY went to the Elite Grill and ordered hamburgers and coffee. The waitress behind the counter beamed at Tex and fumbled nervously with the coffee cup. Down the row of stools, two girls gawked at Tex and whispered.

Tex put down his spoon and smiled a little. "So your name's Berry. It's easy to tell why they call you that. You're as brown as a berry and as fresh and unspoiled."

"Thank you, sir." She laughed to cover her embarrassment. "I've seen a lot of your pictures." She wondered why she lied about it. She had seen only two. "You're—a very good actor."

"It's a living." He catsuped his hamburger. His fingers were long and thin, and they shook. Too much liquor? He asked abruptly: "You going to marry him, Berry—that bronc-buster?"

"Mack? . . . Yes."

"When you say it that way, you break my heart. Isn't there a chance for me?"

Beneath his joke there was an indirect challenge. Berry made a joke of it too. "Until the preacher says the words, there's always a chance." She asked him, as directly: "You and Alyce?"

"I don't think either of us knows," Tex said. "Hollywood's a bad place for love,

Berry. It doesn't get a chance." He finished it with a smile. "But maybe that's just as well, now that I've met you."

She avoided his too-direct glance. Turning to the window at front, she saw Mack staring in.

Holding Alyce's arm, Mack stood in front of the Elite, as still as the hitching post. Through the fly-specked window, Berry saw his anger.

Mack turned to Alyce. They walked away.

He came to Berry's tent before the night events, stood with his back to the open flap. The flickering oil lantern, hanging from the center pole, danced yellow light on his cheeks and pointed up the tight line of his mouth. "That's why you were so anxious to have me go with Alyce—you wanted to be with Tex."

"*I* was anxious?" Berry drew her breath. "*You* were the anxious one. And why haven't I the right to talk to Tex? I think he's—nice."

"I don't. I don't want you to talk to him. He's not our kind."

"Alyce is?"

"That's not the same."

"I have as much right to see him."

Mack stood a minute, looking down at her. "If that's how you want it."

Berry watched him until he walked beyond the ring of yellow light.

The night events were routine. The precision machine that their experience had built could not be splintered by the personal gap widening between them. Berry and Mack worked together, riding through the events mechanically, but well.

They took points with precious seconds to spare, spoke to each other only when they had to speak.

WHEN it was over, Berry waited for Mack to ask her to the rodeo dance. In other towns, Berry's answer always had been: "We need sleep, Mack. Sleep and rest so we can win. There'll be plenty of time for dancing later."

Tonight she would say, "Yes." She would go with him, and dance with him, and laugh with him, try to scale this frightening barrier.

Perhaps, if she had gone dancing with him before, if they had taken time out to laugh—

Mack didn't ask her. He told her. "I know you won't want to go dancing. You'll want your precious sleep. Well, I'm going."

"You're—taking Alyce?"

"She'll probably be there."

"I'm going, too," Berry lied quickly. "Tex is taking me."

Mack took a step. "I told you to stay away from him."

"I'm capable of choosing my friends."

Mack's voice was low. "I'm warning you, Berry."

"You can't threaten me. I have a right—"

"Then you'd better warn Tex." Mack's boots kicked up a tornado of dust as he pounded down the tent street.

Berry walked just as purposefully to the end of the arena. Anger carried her up the three wooden porch steps of the hotel. She told the clerk: "Tex Mawson, please."

The clerk's glance made her realize how brazen she was, stalking Tex. She was about to tell him not to ring the room when he pointed over her shoulder. "There's Mr. Mawson—over there."

Tex crossed the lobby. What would he think of her, coming here, asking for him like a school girl after his autograph? But Tex put her at ease. "I was hoping you'd pass this way," he said, as though he didn't know she had come to see him. "I was just going down to the arena to ask if you'd like to go to the dance."

"Why, I—why, yes!"

Criss-crossed red and green paper transformed the rough ceiling beams of the Tyler courthouse into a make-believe sky of clashing color. The paper lanterns were stars twinkling through. The court benches had been cleared away, the worn floor waxed for gliding boots and slippers.

Music came from a fiddle that jumped alive in the hands of a white-haired

"I've seen a lot of your pictures." She wondered why she lied about it, and she laughed to cover her embarrassment. "You're—a very good actor."

gentleman with a young heart. A piano that had been moved in from the Sunday school next door provided a thumping accompaniment of rapid chords under the fingers of a buxom, laughing ranch girl.

Women turned to look at Tex, whispered enviously, as Berry came in with him. But Berry's glance swept the room to find Mack. She found him in the corner, with Alyce. There were seven men around Alyce, basking in her laughter.

But most of it was for Mack.

The masculine circle parted slightly. Alyce's gown was filmy white tulle, cloud-like, cut low. She flaunted its formality against the other simple gowns. Many of the women, like Berry, were dressed in riding clothes.

"YOU could be that beautiful if you'd dress the part," Tex said.

Berry smiled up at him briefly. "There hasn't been any money. I've been scrimping every cent for the ranch."

"You shouldn't forget you're a woman." Tex lifted his arms for the dance. "A beautiful woman." He seemed momentarily lost in thought. "I don't quite know how to say this so you won't be offended—" He reached for the words. "I'd like to buy you some pretty clothes, Berry."

She missed the step. She stopped dancing.

He said hastily, "I help Alyce buy her clothes. I have a knack for it . . . I could do it for you."

"Oh, I thought you meant—" She started dancing again. "No. Thanks just the same."

Over Tex's shoulder, she saw Mack dance past with Alyce. Mack seemed to look right through her. She had intended to smile, to say, "Hello," casually. His look cut off the smile before it started.

Mack swung Alyce around so that his back was to Berry. Alyce waved a white hand at Tex and laughed. "Hi, pet! Having fun?"

Tex passed it off, the way Berry had wanted to do with Mack. "Let's quit this place a while," Tex suggested, "and go across the street for a flirt with Lady Luck."

"Well, I—" Berry saw Mack was watching her.

"Come on." Tex took her arm. "I have a hunch you'll make me lucky."

The Lucky Seven had a sign in its black-curtained window that said: BAR AND GRILL. But there was little attempt to keep secret the fact that its main business was derived from the spinning wheel in the back room and the busy card tables that flanked the walls.

Tex surveyed the room as if he were looking for someone. His glance stopped on the short, bald house man behind the roulette table. Taking Berry's arm, Tex went over. "Hello, Charlie."

"Well, if it ain't Tex Mawson!" He held out a fat hand. "I thought you'd be in."

"Charlie used to work at a private club in Hollywood," Tex explained. "We're old pals." He handed Charlie a bill from the fat alligator billfold he took from his pocket. Berry's eyes widened at the denomination.

"You do the playing for me." Tex gave her a stack of chips. "And for your luck, you keep ten per cent of what we win."

"I couldn't do that."

"Why not? If we win, it won't be my money." He nodded toward Charlie. "It'll be his, and you'll be doing the winning. So what's wrong with that?"

She put a single white chip on the green felt below number ten, thinking of the Roman numeral in Bar X. The white ball rolled around the spinning disc, jumped, hopped, and finally fell into the slot.

"Ten wins," Charlie said.

"Stay with it," Tex suggested.

Berry did. She lost twice, but percentage definitely was in her favor. The stack of chips grew.

Other players crowded around. She heard one of the men tell a companion: "I could have sworn the wheel was fixed—but it don't look like it now."

IT seemed almost too simple, making money like this, when she thought how she and Mack had sweated in the arena for less. And all the time she had nagged Mack. Not really nagged him, maybe. But she had argued single-heartedly to keep all their efforts fixed on saving pennies to buy the Bar X ranch.

"Getting boring, isn't it?" Tex asked finally. "Shall we cash in?"

"We'd better, while we're still winning."

He laughed at that. He went to the

house bank and brought back a handful of bills. Counting them out, he handed her almost a hundred dollars. "Your share, Berry."

She shook her head. "No . . . I had the fun. I couldn't—"

Tex folded the money and put it into her hand, closed her fingers around it. "You're not taking it from me, remember. It's your winnings from Charlie."

"You—make it sound right."

"Of course, it is." Tex moved her toward the door. "And now that you have money you didn't expect to get, how about buying some clothes?"

"That wouldn't be fair."

"Why not? It's not money you counted on. It's nothing you and Mack earned together."

"Well—" She thought of Alyce's dress and the way Mack had been looking at Alyce. "Well, maybe I could spend—part of it."

"And I'll help you pick the things out." Tex grinned. "I'll come for you in the morning."

Berry had intended to buy only one simple dress, an inexpensive hat, and a pair of shoes. But Tex's judgment of feminine style was as keen as he said it was. He uncovered breathless and expensive beauty in the drab shops of Tyler.

When they started back to Berry's tent with the purchases, Tex helping her carry the packages, they were weary and most of the money was gone. "I'll wait outside," Tex said, "while you put on the black with the sequin neckline. I want to see you in that."

Berry hurried into the tent and changed, fluffed her hair with the brush so it cushioned her face and neck, pulled the soft stockings over her tanned legs. There was no full-length mirror in which she could appraise herself, but the result was mirrored clearly in Tex's eyes when she pulled back the tent flap.

He whistled. "What you've been hiding!" He took her hand. "Look, Berry . . . I've been meaning to say this since last night, and I might as well get it said now. You don't belong in this small-time. You belong in Hollywood."

Berry took her hand away. Tex's words spoiled the momentary pleasure of wearing the new dress—spoiled everything.

"I won't promise to put you in the movies," he said, "though they might go for you at that. But I will promise a good job of some kind in the studio—clothes and money and friends—your kind of people."

"I'm afraid—we've both made a mistake." Berry's fingers closed around the canvas edge of the tent flap behind her. Her nails dug into the canvas stitching. "I'll pack these clothes . . . You can take them back."

"They're yours." He smiled. "It was your money. No strings to my offer either—if you want it that way. I just want to see you get a break."

"No."

"I'm leaving on the one-fifteen train. I had a wire this morning and I have to get back for a picture. I'll wait at the station for you."

Berry's shoulders went back. "I won't be there."

Tex kept the smile. "One-fifteen."

BERRY stood in front of the tent her knees too weak to carry her inside. She took a deep, long breath of fresh, clean air. Her hands clenched into fists.

She wanted Mack. She walked to his tent.

The flap of his tent was rolled, and Berry started in. His back was to her.

There were arms around Mack's neck. White hands at the back of his head. Alyce was kissing him.

Berry wanted to run. She wanted to run to the end of the rodeo grounds and keep running—running . . .

She watched Mack's hands come up and pull Alyce's fingers away.

Alyce saw Berry. Mack swung around. His face flamed. "Berry . . ."

Alyce laughed as her glance swept Berry's dress. "Tex certainly was extravagant."

Mack's bewildered look went from Alyce to Berry and back. "Are you insinuating that Tex bought—"

(Continued on page 91)

THEY COME HOME TO ROOST

Penny had been duped into buying the farm from Larry's uncle, and she had every intention of getting retribution.

PENNY DOBBS had bought this chicken ranch from a nice, old, gray-haired gentleman with a Texas drawl, and it was her intention, if she ever caught up with him, to give him a good, lusty kick on the shins.

But months had passed since he had unloaded the place on her by a very reprehensible trick, and she had about given up hope, when her chance for vengeance came.

It was noon of one of those sunny Southern California days in February, between rainstorms, and her mood was totally out of step with the weather as she came from the poultry yard with the morning's gather of eggs in her apron.

No matter how many times she counted them, the total came only to ten. She gazed with embittered brown eyes at her flock of some one-hundred and fifty leghorns which had finished cramming their craws with the very best and highest-priced laying mash, and were expectantly ogling her for more.

"You even cackle with a Texas accent," she said bitingly.

Penny would have thrown up the sponge before this, if it hadn't been for Hubert Sloan. Hubert was lead man on the final assembly crew in which Penny worked at North American.

Hubert had been amused and pitying and also considerably annoyed, when Penny bought the chicken ranch. He was always interested in keeping track of other people's affair, and he particularly kept an eye on Penny. She was not hard on the masculine eye. She was always accorded her fair share of whistling when she walked through the plant.

Hubert had placed the stamp of offended scorn on her venture. "There's one born every minute," he had sniffed. "You have to be an expert to make money in chickens. You won't last three months."

Penny had been superior about it at the time. Grade A eggs were sixty-cents a dozen, she pointed out. The leghorns she was buying were producing ten

dozen or more eggs a day, weren't they? She had made sure of that by personal observation. She had seen that nice old man collect the eggs right before her eyes.

"He hates to give up a paying investment," she told Hubert. "But his health is bad. The place is big enough to carry three times as many chickens. Before long, I'll be cleaning up three or four hundred a month."

By CLIFF FARRELL

"It's pretty." Larry Westover sighed. "Peaceful! Chickens and sunshine and room to breathe."

PENNY was older now—and so were the leghorns. She had never confessed to Hubert that egg production had fallen off astoundingly the very day the old gentleman moved out and she moved in. From ten dozen or so a day, the output leveled off instantly to a mere trickle.

Penny had been the victim of a salted egg mine. The eggs she had watched the old gentleman collect had been placed there by his own hands during the hours of darkness, or when she was elsewhere.

Investigation proved that her leghorns had passed their prime and were now settling down to a middle-aged life of ease and eating. Renewing the flock meant months of time and heavy expense, even if quality chicks were to be had—which they were not. Every California householder was adding a home chicken yard to fortify ration points. Blooded poultry stock was almost as hard to purchase as pre-war girdles.

Penny had her pride. Because of Hubert's wise attitude she wouldn't for worlds admit she was working on the swing shift to support a flock of venerable, sun-bathing hens. She had read every book available on poultry raising, consulted experts, and it all added up to nothing but red ink in the ledger which she was forced to keep under lock and key because of Hubert's snooping tendencies.

Hubert came around often to offer advice on her venture, and he still believed everything was just ducky with the egg business. He was even showing signs of envy.

The weight of her burden, and the knowledge that Hubert sooner or later must learn the truth, could no longer be taken calmly. Penny was mad, helplessly, smashing mad.

Sounds from the other side of the house told her that Dapper Daisy, the hen no fence could imprison, was out again and diligently engaged in polishing off the last of Penny's winter vegetable garden.

That was the spark that set off the explosion. Penny was seeing red as she walked around the house.

One by one she began hurling eggs at Dapper Daisy. Her vehemence was greater than her accuracy. None of the missiles so much as grazed the mark. One was so far wide of the target as to splatter against the kitchen screen door. But Dapper Daisy got the general idea. She left the garden in a hurry and headed for the sweet peas.

"That's a powerful waste of good aigs," an injured voice remonstrated. "You shouldn't let your temper get away with you like that."

PENNY whirled, glaring at a lanky stranger who had entered from the street by way of the driveway behind her. He wore a dark gray suit and a soft-collared shirt with a black tie, and didn't seem exactly at home in that garb which was obviously very new. He was young, but there were fine lines at the corners of his eyes and wide mouth, and his skin had that uncertain hue of a man once deeply tanned, who had bleached out.

It was his Texas drawl that intrigued her, and aroused her instant antagonism.

"They soaked me a buck for scrambled aigs this mornin' in town," he went on reprovingly. "Only four of 'em. But I reckon you chicken owners get so used to aigs you don't think of 'em as being worth much."

"Ha!" said Penny. "If you're selling anything, this is my busy day."

He grinned. "I came out on the bus from Long Beach, hoping I'd find my Grandpaw here."

"Your Grandpaw?"

"Grandpaw Westover. The last letter I got from him was while I was in a hospital in the islands. He said he had taken over a little chicken farm at this address. He mentioned he was aiming on selling the place. They shipped me home right after that, and my mail hasn't caught up with me since. I'm out of the army now. My name's Larry Westover."

Penny's first impulse was to run him off the place. Then she decided to learn more about all this.

She said, "I bought the place from Mr. Westover. I haven't heard from him since I took over the ranch, but I'd be very glad to help you find him."

"Grandpaw will be back in Amarillo by this time," Larry Westover said. "He mentioned he aimed on going home if he found a buyer. He didn't cotton much to California."

He walked to the poultry fence and gazed admiringly at the chickens. He let his eyes wander appreciatively over the landscape. It was the normal setting for a chicken ranch. Oil derricks loomed in the distance. Ploughed fields, truck gardens, billboards, and a thin scattering of small bungalows dotted the surroundings.

Penny's half acre was fenced. An unpaved driveway led in from an unpaved street. The house had been originally intended as a brooding shed. It was built of planks and bats, whitewashed, and had a tar-paper roof. The interior was partitioned into a kitchen, bath, and combination living room and boudoir. She had disguised some of its ugliness with chintz curtains, climbing roses, and flowerbeds.

Two eucalyptus trees shaded the shed at the rear which served as a garage and work room for handling eggs—when there had been eggs to handle.

"IT'S pretty." Larry Westover sighed. "Peaceful! Chickens and sunshine and room to breathe. Scrambled aigs that taste like aigs. Nobody to order a man around."

Penny eyed him suspiciously. "It is nice," she agreed tentatively.

He peered into the workshed. Empty egg crates were stacked in a corner. Another crate stood on the bench, and to the eye it seemed to be about two-thirds filled. As a matter of fact only the top layer held eggs. Two or three dozen more eggs lay on the racks as though Penny had been interrupted in the process of packing them.

Larry Westover didn't know that all this was a stage setting. Those eggs were old-timers. Penny kept them on hand to delude Hubert Sloan whenever he came prying. She shifted the props around occasionally for Hubert's benefit.

"It's swell," Larry Westover said fervently.

"You're going back to Texas, too, I imagine?" Penny inquired.

"Oh, I don't know." He shrugged. "I've got no folks there any more, except Grandpaw, and he's always rambling around somewhere, dabbling in real estate, or trading horses or something. I was working in Los Angeles before I went into the army. I might take a notion to stick around this part of the country. I'm just looking around."

Penny was encouraged. There might be some way she could induce him to lure his Grandpaw into her reach, where she could at least give the old reprobate a piece of her mind.

"Can I induce you to stay for lunch, Mr. Westover?" she asked. "Surely you must be hungry?"

He hesitated, and in spite of himself his glance wandered to her apron in which three of the eggs still remained. Penny chuckled. "All right. How do you want 'em? Scrambled, fried, or boiled?"

"Any old way," he said ecstatically. "As long as they're the real article. Ma'am, did you ever eat an army aig? Worse yet, did you ever try one of those powdered things that taste like chalk?"

"My name," Penny said, "is Penelope Dobbs. Miss Penelope Dobbs."

She gave deft emphasis to her unmarried state. A touch of romance never came amiss when a person didn't want to lose track of a man. She had paid his Grandpaw two-thousand dollars for this place and wanted her money back. She had worked two years at the aircraft plant to save up that sum in cash and war bonds.

While her visitor walked around the place, smelling the flowers, talking to the chickens, and reveling in the wide open spaces, she changed from her jeans into a print dress which she happened to know was very becoming. She added a few touches to her face, and Larry Westover's approving eyes told her that she had achieved the right effect.

SHE cooked a Spanish omelet and baked a pan of biscuits. There was an exalted gleam in his eye as he ate.

He mentioned being wounded on Saipan. "But it was the fever that really tuckered me out," he added. Then he changed the subject. "Chicken ranching must be a lot of fun, Miss Dobbs?"

Suddenly Penny guessed what was in his mind. She became wildly excited but kept it from showing.

"It has some drawbacks, of course," she said.

"About how many aigs to a bunch of chickens like that do you get a day—on the average?" he asked off-hand.

"It varies, of course, according to season, but I expect any number up to a gross."

Larry Westover was firmly on the hook now. With elaborate unconcern he asked about the price of feed, poultry diseases, and handling costs. Penny told him the actual figures.

"You seem interested in chickens, Mr. Westover," she needled him.

"Over in the jungles, I swore if I ever got out of the army I'd never—" He grinned and shrugged. "War isn't much fun, Miss Dobbs. What kind of chickens are you raising?"

That was all she needed to know. He was a babe in the woods when it came to poultry, just as she had been when

she fell for that fraud his grandfather had perpetrated.

"Leghorns," she told him. "I just hate to think of parting with them, not to mention giving up the place."

"How's that? You're leaving here?"

"Y-yes," Penny admitted, casting around for an excuse, and hitting the only one that seemed logical to a woman. "I—I'm thinking of getting married. I've been putting off advertising the place for sale until the very last minute. But . . . ."

She smiled regretfully. Larry Westover finished eating in reflective silence. She soothed her conscience with the knowledge that she had told him only the precise truth. She *did* expect a gross of eggs a day, even though she had been consistently disappointed. She *did* expect to marry—some day. It probably would be Hubert Sloan, for he was at least persistent.

She knew what the next question would be. "What's a place like this worth, as it stands?"

She told him, and was pleased when he didn't shrink too much. She doubted if he had two-thousand dollars. But his Grandpaw did. Grandpaw had her two-thousand dollars.

A car drove up. It was Hubert. He was thirty and round-faced and fleshy. He smoked cigars, wore slacks and a sports coat and white and tan shoes, even though he was en route to the aircraft plant. Hubert appeared in work clothes only at work.

He shook hands listlessly with Larry Westover. He was not pleased at finding a possible rival on the scene.

"Let's get going," Hubert said to Penny.

They were in the same car pool and this was Hubert's week to burn gasoline.

"You'll have to go without me, Hubert," Penny said. "I'll drive my own car today. I want to drop Mr. Westover at the bus line, and I've also got to do a little shopping."

"Any reason why I can't take Westover to the bus stop?" Hubert glowered.

"You're a dear, Hubert," said Penny. "That will give me more time for my errand."

SHE went into the house to change to her work jumper and pack a lunch. She faintly heard Hubert's voice: "—and she could do even better if she'd follow my advice. Right from the first I told her this place was big enough to handle three times as many hens, but . . . ."

They passed out of hearing and she heard them drive away.

Penny visited half a dozen markets on her way to work, and bought two cartons of nice white, Grade A eggs at each stop. She winced a little at the total cost, but she took comfort in remembering that Grandpaw Westover had made a similar investment in order to unload the chicken ranch on her gullible doorstep.

On the assembly line that night she dazzled Hubert with her vivacity. Any jealous doubts he might have entertained began to fade.

"Penny," Hubert orated as they ate lunch, "my advice is to put in a couple hundred more chickens on your place. Why be satisfied with peanuts? Now, I'll be willing to buy a half interest in the place if—"

Penny began laughing hysterically at that point. Hubert glared, then stalked away offended.

Penny was awakened the next morning by cheery whistling in the yard. Just as she had anticipated, the pattern was the same one she and Grandpaw Westover had followed. She hadn't taken the word of even a nice, old man about the number of eggs his chickens were laying. She too had appeared at the ranch to see for herself, before investing her money.

LARRY WESTOVER was out there now. He wore jeans and a flannel shirt, and was happily carrying eggs from the poultry yard into the shed.

They were nice, big eggs. They were the ones Penny had bought the previous

day and with which she had salted the laying troughs when she came home from work in the dark hours after midnight.

She dressed and went out. "Sa-ay!"

Suddenly Penny guessed what was in his mind. She became wildly excited. "You seem interested in chickens, Mr. Westover," she said.

Larry Westover said, wonderingly. "All that stuff about girls being at their worst when they first get up is a lot of bunk, isn't it?"

"You didn't learn to say nice things like that in the army," she accused him.

"There's lots of things I didn't learn in the army. Did you really mean what you said yesterday about selling this place?"

"I'm afraid so." Penny nodded with just the right touch of regret.

He became business-like. "I might be interested if the price was right." He rubbed his chin. "I figure I could go about fifteen hundred."

He imagined he was being shrewd, but he had inherited none of his grandfather's guile at bargaining. He was only going through a formula he believed was customary. Penny stood firm on her price.

"I'll take it," he finally said. "I got Grandpaw on long distance last night, and he's loaning me the cash. He wired the money. I'm ready to close the deal today, if it's all right with you."

Penny's knees were suddenly shaking. "Did—did you tell your grandfather what you wanted with the money?" she asked.

"I couldn't hurt his feelings by saying I was buying a place he had given up," Larry Westover admitted. "I just said I had a deal in mind that would make me some money, and needed cash."

Then he added: "Of course I'll sign over a mortgage on the place to Grandpaw. He'll have the ranch as security. He can't lose."

"That," said Penny, "is exactly the right thing to do."

A shadow came into his face. "That Hubert Sloan is a mighty nice chap," he remarked. "I know you two will be mighty happy."

"What? Oh, yes. Thank you." Penny caught on, just in time, though she felt a twinge of indignation. Hubert had done some more talking out of turn. It was characteristic of Hubert that he would try to eliminate possible competition by a trick like that.

Well, it didn't matter what Larry Westover thought or took for granted. But she wished he would quit looking at her in that regretful sort of way.

THEY went to the bank in Hawthorne and placed the deal in escrow. It would take about a week to search title.

That was a very trying week for Penny. In the first place, Larry Westover awakened her each morning with his tuneless whistling as he arrived to collect eggs and putter around. Penny had expected something like that, and continued to salt the chicken mine for his benefit.

Each day she drove away, ostensibly to deliver eggs to the commission house. Each night she distributed those same eggs where they would do the most good, slipping in a few more during the day when he was elsewhere. It became monotonous.

In the second place, Hubert became difficult. He turned pale, then livid, when she told him she was selling the chicken ranch to Larry Westover.

"Are you crazy?" he yelled. "Giving up a paying proposition like that! Why didn't you give me first chance? I'd have bought that place if—"

"You had your chance, Hubert," Penny told him. "And you fumbled it. Hubert, you are a worm. Please crawl away somewhere."

In the third place, along toward the latter part of that awful week, Penny found herself assailed by loss of appetite, a weariness of spirit, and a tendency to view the future through a bleak, blue mist. She was often the victim of hot and cold flashes, and when she realized that these symptoms occurred only when she was in arm's reach of Larry Westover, she became panic-stricken.

Above all, that would never do. She could picture how utterly Larry would loathe her when he learned she was using him as a tool to cut the financial throat of that nice, old wretch who was his grandfather.

And up to now she was keenly aware that Larry's attitude toward her was not one of loathing by any stretch of the imagination. His cheery outlook was replaced by an increasing grimness as the week came to an end.

He was gallant about it. He kept telling her what a grand guy was Hubert Sloan. He knew they would be mighty happy. Penny began to hate Hubert.

She doubted if she could have stood the strain another day, when the bank notified them that the final papers were ready.

It was in the afternoon. In her work jumper she drove Larry to the bank and they concluded the deal.

"I'll move my things out first thing in the morning," she said. She had a tough time fighting back tears. Larry wished her all the luck in the world. He was smiling and gloomy. She ran from him and got into her car. She headed for the aircraft plant.

BUT she didn't check in. Instead, she turned in her badge and applied for an availability slip. "I'm leaving California," she explained wearily. "I've got to. Just got to. T-Tell Hubert Sloan, my lead man, that I hope he chokes. Tell him I said he was a b-big lug."

It was starting to rain, gently at first, but firmly. Darkness had come when she parked the car on the ranch driveway and went into the house and switched on the light.

The rain dripped from the eaves, and her tears fell dismally as she packed her

belongings and placed them in the car.

Then she got out her fountain pen and wrote a note to Larry Westover which she pinned on a curtain. She told the whole story of the salted egg mine. She finished it with this statement:

"And that Grandpaw of yours can laugh on the other side of his face now. He's got his ranch back and I've got my money back. I'm glad, I'm just glad he got what he deserves.

Penelope Dobbs."

She kept saying it as she drove away. "I'm glad, I'm glad." But she kept on crying and it kept on raining.

She moved in with a girl aircraft worker who had an apartment in Los Angeles. It continued raining. It rained for a week.

Penny sold her car to a second-hand dealer. She hated California. She never wanted to see sunshine again. Nor rain. She had come from Ohio and had an aunt in Cleveland. She decided to go back home.

She tried the railroad ticket office but they said maybe in three weeks. So she bought a bus ticket.

It was Saturday afternoon, and it was still raining when the taxi unloaded her at the bus station. The waiting room was a madhouse of damp, tired people. Outside, the streets were flooded with water swirling over the curbs.

Penny fought her way through the crowd toward the gate where a swarm of eastbound passengers were waiting. She collided with a tall, damp person and looked up.

It was Larry Westover. He had a new, yellow suitcase in one hand and a bus ticket in the other. He stood staring down at her, not believing it.

She said, "Oh!"

Larry said, "I searched the whole blasted town for you."

She said again, "Oh!"

"I gave Hubert Sloan a punch in the nose for that one he pulled on me," Larry said. "I trapped him into admitting you never said you'd marry him."

Penny's lips framed another "oh," but no sound came.

"That was after I had sold Hubert the aig ranch," Larry went on.

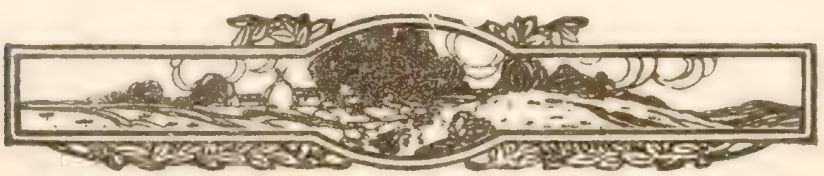
"Y-you sold H-Hubert the ranch?"

"The place didn't look the same the next morning when I went out there," he said. "With you gone there wasn't anything there. Nothing but a bunch of wet chickens and a shack. I didn't even have the heart to go into the house. Hubert showed up then, and we closed the deal right on the spot."

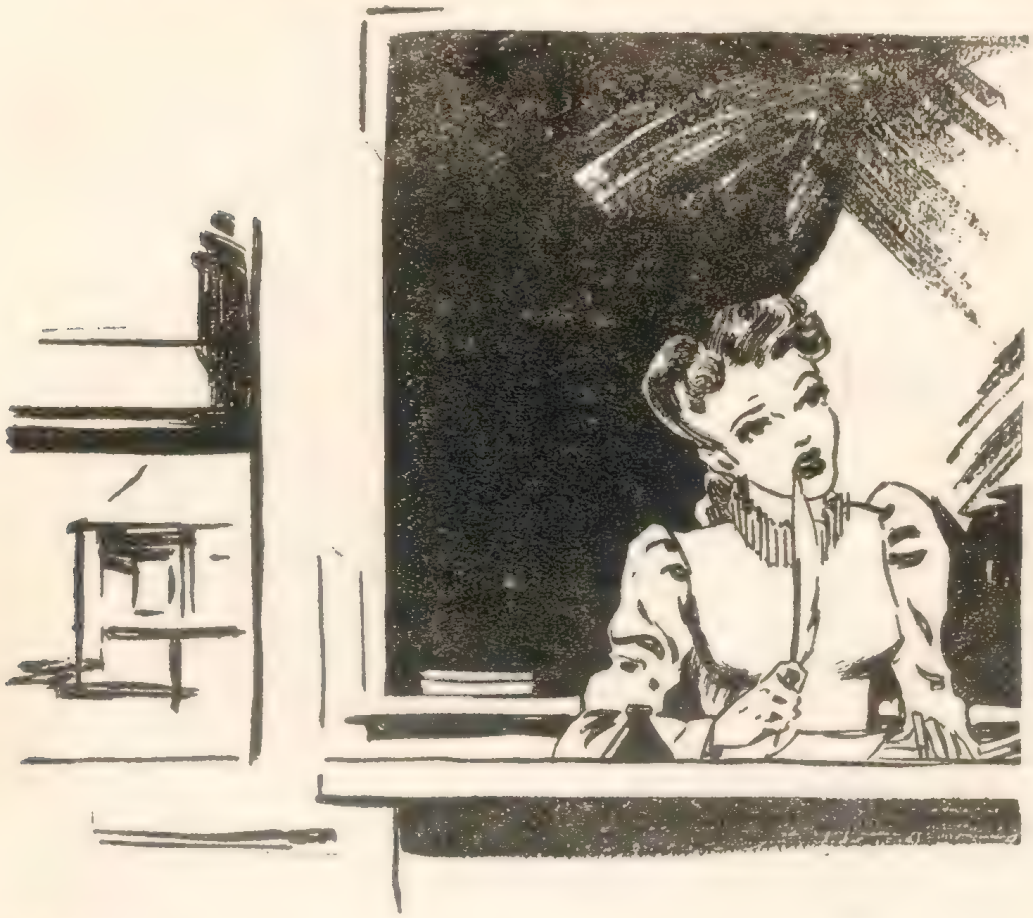
"You never went into the house?" Penny's voice was faint. She was thinking of that note she had left pinned on a curtain. She could picture Hubert's face when he read the news of the salted egg mine.

Larry's arms went around her and he was kissing her. Nobody paid any attention to them, for people were always kissing other people in bus stations. The gate opened and eastbound passengers stampeded past them, leaving them standing there.

The rain kept pouring down outside, but to Penny this was a grand day. The bus pulled out and they didn't care. Larry wasn't giving her a chance to explain anything. She decided she would have plenty of time later. Just loads of time.



TEACHER'S PET



WHEN A SCHOOLMA'AM hears her heart trying to double time at the mere sound of a voice, her teaching days are numbered.

When the speeded up emotion is inspired by a softly drawling dialect, the schoolma'am should have her head examined.

When this daily stimulant happens to be the crude vernacular of one of her pupils, to whom she is supposed to impart enough correct textbook English to win him a diploma from the eighth-grade senior class of her school, a schoolma'am with any common sense should resign forthwith.

When—but there was nothing to be gained by Marcia Adams revolving more of these fantastic *whens* in her once practical mind. Any wise decision had several handicapping features.

First, Marcia Adams was as pretty as any girl of eighteen could be, whose rounded cheeks are too much a reminder of the sun-kissed side of a ripe peach.

Second, the most primly designed and straightest lined dresses were compelled by nature to pass over certain captivating curves that were destined to build up any man's imagination, regardless of how the schoolma'am's frocks had been cut.

Third—when Marcia was desperately and, probably, hopelessly in love with long and gawky Bill James, who was as clumsy and as given to smashing classroom lingo, school decorum, and other more intangible things as a whole china shop full of bulls—things were bad.

Marcia heard Bill James now, as she

★ ★ ★

It wasn't in keeping with Marcia's training, for her to fall for Bill James, but—

★ ★ ★

By STEVEN EDWARD

"I sure wasn't thinkin' I'd git that diploma, ma'am," Bill said.

approached the farthest corner of the little, sun-blistered schoolhouse of Paint Rock. Bill was, at the moment, forgetting discipline, as usual, to explain to a pair of fourteen-age girls, the only other members of the senior class, his personal opinion of a touchy topic in the Sliding River, Arizona, range country.

"Yuh see the pole cat smellin', dang blasted woolies gits inter the upper medder an' we hadda sting the dirty hides o' them two sheep herders with birdshot, 'fore we learnt 'em to git the—excuse me—I mean chouse them bleaties back onto the mesa where they belong. 'Twas some ruckus an—"

The slow drawl of Bill James, six-foot even, hundred and seventy, a head taller than the schoolma'am, ceased abruptly. Bill rubbed the grin from his liberally freckled face, hooked his jingling Mexican spurs into the ironwork of a desk across the aisle, and appeared to swallow his tongue.

"Please to excuse me, ma'am—I mean, Miss Adams," faltered Bill. "I was forgittin' the rules 'cause o' them Palo Verde woolies rilin' me up—"

"William!" Marcia's voice was as stern as a curved, red mouth and an

ineffective effort to avoid seeing Bill's mild, blue eyes could make it. "You are supposed to be studying lesson number seven. From the recital I overheard inadvertently, I'll have to admit that giving you a diploma next month appears impossible."

"Yes, ma'am—I mean Miss Adams," replied Bill James humbly. "I guess I ain't fittin' yet for one o' them diplomas. It seems nobody has been able to learn me nothin'. Over in Tuscarawa county the schoolma'am give me up also. That was two years back, an' I was just turned twenty. It seems—"

"Yes, William, you've told me all of that several times," interrupted Marcia in her grimmest tone. "Must you keep reminding all of us and yourself that you are twenty-two years old, and ride twelve miles every day from Tuscarawa county to attend the Paint Rock school?"

"Excuse it, ma'am—Miss Adams," mumbled her rusty-haired, wrong-way prodigy. "Been wishin' you'd call me Bill."

Marcia suddenly wondered if she had fallen on her head when a baby. Or was she just one of those feminine throwbacks who couldn't resist the physical appeal of a Bill James?

How, under creation, could she even try to perform a miracle upon what appeared to be almost a vacuum inside Bill's erect, well-shaped head, when her fingers tingled with an impulse to tousle his rusty, stubbornly pompadoured hair?

MARCIA walked to the window and glanced out at the cracked and baking street of Paint Rock. She felt that she hated the town, all of Arizona and its heat, and especially she hated a young woman over in Tuscarawa county, for whom Bill James was working his head to the solid bone to come up with an eighth-grade diploma.

Bill had told Marcia about this when he enrolled in her senior class a month before. Marcia had wanted to refuse, but when Bill smiled, the grin went all over his freckled face and made him look more like a six-year-old kid than a raw-boned hunk of a man.

"Y'see, ma'am, Lita Carson's old man sent her off to school a couple-a years ago, about the time me an' Lita was plannin' on bein' hitched," had been Bill's plea. "Lita's been learnt how to talk as good as any dude, an' she's thinkin' maybe some day I'll be a big cowman, an' she ain't wantin' folks should be lookin' down on me on account o' me not bein' able to show I've been some eddicated."

Standing here by the window, Marcia tried to keep her mind from going back to that. As dumb as he might be with words, Marcia was convinced, right from the first, that there wouldn't be many who would look down upon Bill James, and Marcia could understand why she should think like that.

During the four weeks past, Marcia hadn't changed her mind on the subject of Bill James ever being one who wouldn't be respected. For one thing, something told her that it might not be healthy for anyone to look down upon Bill James and let him find it out.

Marcia tried to make the distant, silvery line of Sliding River seem like a tumbling creek that ran through the pleasant, cool grassland of her home on the Texas Llano. She couldn't hold the idea.

True, over at the edge of Tuscarawa county, there was a wonderful green valley. Once, only a few days ago, she had allowed Bill James to persuade her to ride over there with him on a Saturday.

Marcia recalled now how she had purposely attempted to get into the saddle from the wrong side of the livery stable horse. Then, how she had fumbled with the reins and wouldn't permit the horse to go faster than a spine jolting lope.

All the time, she had watched Bill on a restless, fiddle-footed black horse. He had been like a part of the beast, lithe and quick and graceful. They had come upon one of Bill's strays, a belligerent steer.

The easy dexterity with which Bill had roped and handled the steer would have been worth seeing at any rodeo, Marcia knew. Then, when she was forgetting Bill's quaint juggling of words, for some time Marcia realized that *she* had been the pupil and Bill's complete assurance and range knowledge had made him the teacher.

Marcia had signed a two-year contract to teach the mixed school at Paint Rock. Having lost four woman teachers, the school board had insisted this was not a matrimonial agency, and that Marcia would forfeit all of her pay if she failed to fulfill her contract.

MARCIA turned suddenly back from the window. She was thinking, with a needling of conscience, of how she had let Bill James help her from her horse when they had come back from the ride. How she had been so grateful when Bill had promised, then, that he would teach her really how to ride.

Stop it, you fool. Marcia had to quit this line of thinking. It probably wouldn't keep her from going right on loving Bill James and hating Lita Carson, whom she had never seen, but who had Bill all to herself every Sunday over in Tuscarawa county.

"That isn't the page, William," said Marcia, glancing at the book he held before him, but didn't seem to see. "This afternoon you have to recite *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* remember?"

Bill sort of muttered under his breath, and Marcia wasn't sure the word was one that she should hear. So she pretended she hadn't.

The recital of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by Bill James was an epic in mispronunciation, with an interpretation of its beautiful fantasy that the other Bill, last name Shakespeare, would never have recognized. Nevertheless, Marcia clenched her conscience between her even white teeth and marked Bill James's papers to pass him from the eighth grade back into the world he understood.

"Goshdangitall!" exploded Bill James all in one word. "I sure wasn't thinkin' I'd git that diploma, ma'am — Miss Adams."

All other pupils of Paint Rock's mixed school had departed. Bill turned his dusty Stetson over and over in his strong, long-fingered hands.

"I passed you, Will—Bill," said Marcia, trying to keep her voice steady, "because your perseverance and your devotion to—to Miss Carson earned it. You've been a good pupil, Bill."

"But I wasn't wanting to be a good pupil," blurted Bill. "An' this bein' the last day 'fore vacation time, I—well, I brung yuh a present, Miss—Marcia."

Marcia tried to laugh lightly, wondering how her heart could be so far out of bounds as to squeeze her voice almost to a whisper.

"You shouldn't have done that, Bill. There are places where teachers' pets bring them big red apples, but you aren't teacher's pet, and there aren't any apples in Arizona."

Bill's mild, blue eyes were like those of a little boy about to cry.

"Dogdangit!" Bill could do the darndest things to simple words. "This ain't —I mean aren't—isn't a apple. I've had that black hoss o' mine busted to carry a lady, an'—an' he's yourn! An' I'll give yuh a lesson tomorrow, an' we'll git a picnic lunch from the *Eatery,* an' I'll show yuh where I'm buildin' my new house."

Marcia's first impulse was to refuse flatly. Then she had the quick, cold questioning of jealousy that comes to every woman.

"You had *Midnight* broken for a woman—for me to ride?" Then Marcia couldn't keep the words from sliding off her tongue. "I suppose Lita Carson rode the horse to help gentle him?"

"Why—er—that is, yup, she did," gulped Bill; then he added with all of the quick thinking duplicity of a man. "But Lita wasn't knowin' she was helpin' take kinks outn' *Midnight* so you could make 'im yore ridin' hoss."

Marcia arose, and all of the peachy pinkness went out of her cheeks. Her

brown eyes kindled as she extended her hand.

"Goodbye, and good luck, William. I'll be leaving for home on the tri-weekly train tomorrow. Riding isn't fun for me, and I would have no place to keep *Midnight*. Thanks just the same, William."

MARCIA knew her hand was cold, as Bill's strong fingers clasped it uncertainly. But then she turned away abruptly. She heard Bill making funny noises in his throat, trying to speak.

Two riders clattered up to the school, swung off in haste, and clumped in with jingling spurs. Marcia welcomed the break.

"Thought we'd find yuh here, Bill," greeted one man who had the marks of a hard ride through the brush upon him. "That *Carrano* greaser has busted out agin. His devils has cut fence on the Bar Q, the Bearfoot, an' yore west range, Bill."

"Yup," said the other man, a skinny, sun-dried specimen. "We need yuh to git the Slidin' River crews together, Bill. They'll go after *Carrano* for keeps if yuh take the lead. We're countin' on yuh, an' we ain't no time to lose."

Marcia saw that Bill's moving lips were uttering words unfit for the ears of any respectable schoolma'am, so she made out not to hear.

"I'll be ridin' back, M—Miss Adams," announced Bill. "I'll be in Paint Rock 'fore that train leaves. Like I said, I'm givin' yuh the black hoss."

Bill went out with the two ranchers. Marcia's small hand went to her throat. It hadn't been her heart choking her, for her heart had gone with Bill James.

If it hadn't been for Lita Carson. What did Bill think he was doing? Or was Bill really so stupid that he didn't understand? Having Lita Carson tame a horse for her to ride!

Accepting a diploma he never could have earned, to make his prideful showing to the girl he intended to marry—but wait—the neatly inked diploma still was lying upon Marcia's desk.

Marcia wanted to bury her head on her arms and cry. Instead, she gathered her few books quickly and closed the schoolhouse, leaving Bill's diploma upon the desk.

Marcia displayed trim ankles crossing the baked alkali street to the *Eatery*. She felt cold, although it was but little after noon and the Arizona sun was putting on a special 110-degree show.

Marcia saw Bill's lithely moving figure as he went into the Scorpion saloon with the two ranchers. Men in a hurry? But never in too great haste to quench their insatiable, animal thirst!

She wanted a tall glass of cold tea, but it didn't come to Marcia's mind that her desire for tea and the men's thirst for more potent drinks were all one and the same human pattern.

Marcia was in the door of the *Eatery*, when she gave one quick backward glance. She saw *Midnight*, the glossy black, Bill's own idea of a red apple for his teacher.

Midnight was hitched near the watering trough. Marcia noticed that Bill hadn't yet changed the horse's gear. There was still the deep Mexican saddle, the lariat of braided hair at the horn, and a Winchester holstered in the saddle boot.

Marcia hated Bill James, she thought, and herself. But more especially she hated Lita Carson. What dolts men were! Thinking she would accept a horse that had been broken to "lady riding" by that high-and-mighty Carson girl who had insisted Bill get some learning into his thick head!

"Why, if I had her chance, do you think I'd be that kind of a hifalutin' fool!"

Marcia didn't realize that she had exclaimed audibly and angrily, until she saw Sung Lee, the *Eatery* Chinese cook, staring at her. She went to a rear booth that was partitioned off, and her eyes were stinging. It had just come to her that she was being exactly that kind of a hifalutin' fool, with inexcusable reason.

Bill intended to marry Lita Carson,

The flat crack of the Winchester proved Marcia wasn't fooling. "The sneakin' sidewinders!" she said.

and in his simple way he had only "brought teacher a big, red apple."

MARCIA was sipping the cold tea and munching one of Sung Lee's rice cakes, when Bill James and the two ranchers strode into the *Eatery*. Marcia realized she hadn't been seen, for the three men continued their conversation.

"But Carrano a'ready run off three-hund'ed head, an' he's playin' smart greaser," said one rancher. "He's scattered his riders in pairs, cuttin' fences where they ain't guarded. We can't let 'im make his gather, 'cause he'll night drive 'em across the border."

"It means, we gotta scatter out an' round up the fence cutters, Bill," put in the other rancher. "What yuh propose 'll lose us a whole mess o' cows if we misfire."

Marcia wondered how she could be so hungry for a man's voice, knowing she didn't intend to see Bill James again. But her small hands were tightly clenched, waiting for Bill's slow, ungrammatical drawl.

When it came, Marcia's hands tight-

ened still more. She could feel the flame flooding up her neck to her face. Her lips were compressed, and there was an icy lump replacing her heart.

"We'll make this one grand finale for Carrano's raiders," said Bill James crisply. "Carrano will be expecting us to scatter, as you indicate, Hardy. This time we'll cross and deploy all of our boys on the other side of the border. It's irregular and illegal, but it's time Carrano was given a demonstration in force. I'll look after the extra-legal technicalities if it ever gets into the courts."

"Reckon yuh got the right idea, Bill," replied one of the ranchers. "You've studied law enough to know, an' if yuh say it's to be thataway, we'll take a chance."

Such wisdom as she had accumulated in her eighteen years fled from Marcia's mind. She bit her lower lip until the blood started.

"Grand finale?" "Irregular and illegal?" "Demonstration in force?" "Extra-legal technicalities?"

Bill's clear-cut phrases pounded into her brain. He would look after the technicalities *because he had studied law enough to know!*

It wasn't only that Bill James had been pretending to study eighth-grade English for a diploma, to please a girl he planned to marry. He had made a complete fool out of Marcia Adams, and she was madder when she realized she was also a lovesick fool.

Then one of the ranchers laughed shortly as the three men grabbed up sandwiches and prepared to leave, eating them on the way.

"Maybe we hadn't oughtta busted in like we done, Bill," said the rancher. "How was yuh makin' out with the little schoolma'am? I'm bettin' yuh lose. Yuh can't just see a purty face, like yuh done when she landed in Paint Rock, an' play off one gal agin another with a dang fool idea like yuh had. Yuh hear what Lita . . ."

The rancher's booming voice was cut off abruptly as the three men left the *Eatery.* Marcia would have traded ten years of her young life to have heard the rest of that about Lita. But for a good five minutes Marcia sat rigidly frozen to her chair.

All she did was whisper with wild resentment a few names that she ached to call Bill James to his face. She was so thoroughly stunned for the moment, that consciousness almost left her.

He brought teacher a big, red apple. Playing off one girl against another. She had been nitwitted enough to believe him, to love him, to give him a neatly inked diploma.

That rancher's jesting voice boomed over and over, "Yuh hear what Lita . . ?" No more.

PAINT ROCK'S baked street seemed empty. Apparently Bill James and his friends had ridden out. But *Midnight* still stood hitched at the rack. The black horse's gear hadn't been changed. Evidently Bill had brought another horse to town today.

Marcia couldn't think clearly. She saw everything through a black haze of anger. She went into the schoolhouse and started to tear Bill's forgotten diploma. His diploma! And he had studied law!

Suddenly she rolled up the half torn diploma and stuck it inside her waist. She glanced out, and the black horse was still hitched. She pulled a valise from the school closet.

"Play one girl against another, will he?" she gritted between clenched teeth. "Lita Carson must have a diploma? Well, Bill, she'll get your eighth-grade diploma. If only he hadn't been a lowdown cheat, an' him talkin' about how woolies smell like pole cats!"

Perhaps Marcia didn't realize that her own language was undergoing considerable lapse. Nor did it strike her mind that cheating could be a two-way road, not even when she crossed the street, untied *Midnight,* and hit the deep Mexican saddle with a clean, light jump from the ground.

Nights she had worried about Bill James. Hoping she could improve his

awkward, drawling speech. Not letting even Bill's apparent stupidity keep her from loving him.

The way this rode her, she could never return to Paint Rock school. If it had been anything but outright cheating, making her such a fool that Bill's neighbors knew it and laughed.

Marcia was so intent upon that one idea that she didn't consider any little part she had been playing. Or what Bill James would think if he saw this fool-headed schoolma'am now.

Marcia had changed at the school into clean but faded overalls and scuffed riding boots. Her blue, cotton man's shirt was open at the throat. Blunt, prodding spurs raked the ribs of the big black horse as soon as they were out of the town.

Marcia Adams, the little schoolma'am who boarded a horse from the wrong side, who didn't ride a horse faster than a safe lope, and had to be helped from the saddle, and running *Midnight*—Bill's red apple for teacher—and hitting the crooked trail, hell-for-leather, straight for Bill's valley ranch.

"I'll slap Bill's diploma right smack into the teeth o' that uppity Lita Carson!" said Marcia shrilly. "I'll learn Bill James some of the things that wasn't in none o' his books!"

She had to breathe the black horse after a while. An hour and a half passed before she sighted the green valley. A winding ribbon of clear water flowed into Sliding River. The streams formed a triangle and created what Bill had told her was his best grass, the fattening meadow for prime beef ready to market.

"Probable Creek," whispered Marcia with fury still choking her. "That's what he called it, an' it ain't Probable no more."

Marcia could see the red painted roofs of Bill's ranch buildings as she topped a rise. The thin air made the house seem nearer than its distance of three miles.

Marcia saw the fattening two- and three-year-old whitefaces in the lush meadow grass. Then she pulled *Midnight* to an abrupt halt.

Marcia opened her eyes. "Yuh jest keep yoreself quiet like, child," said the woman, pushing Marcia back. "Yuh must be thet schoolma'am o' Bill James'."

Two bearded men were on horses over among the cattle. A third man was dismounted. This man was cutting fence, and Marcia heard the zinging of the severed taut wires.

The bearded men, Marcia could see, were in position to stampede something like a thousand head of Bill's best beef.

ALL fury and emotion left Marcia or, rather, her hot anger was shifted from Bill James to these outlaw raiders. All of the instinct of a range-bred girl, which she was, was transformed into action.

Bawling, crowding, some of the cows were already moving toward the first fence gap. The wire cutter moved over to another panel.

Marcia's swift, sure movement scarcely befitted a prim, young schoolma'am. Nor did her language befit the mentor

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Stella depended on Vince Farley to save the Circle P, but it looked as though he had his mind on feminine charms instead.

Trouble in Indian Valley

"BY THUNDER, I won't do it!" Sam Packard of the Circle P slammed a ham-like fist against the rolltop desk in his office. "It wasn't bad enough when you took to chasin' Vince Farley like he was the only thing in pants ever to hit this spread. But now you want to boost his wages simply because he might be better on the sofa than he is around the corral!"

Sam stared defiantly into the green eyes of his only daughter. What he saw, in a more rational moment, would have brought a glow of warmth to his tough pioneer heart. From the tips of her delicately pointed boots, to the mass of tawny auburn curls which tumbled to her shoulders, Stella Packard was the perfect image of the mother she had lost at birth, twenty years ago. The same husky voice, the same throaty laughter, the same flawless white complexion and well moulded curves that caused many a Circle P hand to turn his head, despite the fact that her beauty was an every day pleasure.

But when her father saw red, everything else was wasted on him. "Any man who would pull out on an outfit as shorthanded as this one would steal the coins from a dead man's eyes," he thundered. "And you want me to offer him more money. I'd offer him the tip of my boot if the dang foot wasn't wrapped in this infernal plaster cast!"

There was no use arguing with him in his present mood. With an impudent toss of her head, she stamped out of the office. It wasn't that she was throwing herself at Vince, as her father so firmly believed. There were plenty of better looking men about. Vince's nose was a bit crooked where a fist had made its impression in his youth, and one of his teeth was chipped. She'd noticed that, the first moment they met.

THE CIRCLE P was still in good shape then. Situated at the head of Indian Valley, where it controlled the waters of the Rio Clara, it presented the least attractive possibilities to Bull Thompson's cattle thieves who were systematically picking the valley clean. Even then, as the raids had come closer, the driving more of the neighboring ranches into bankruptcy, Circle P hands had been quitting in large numbers. Married men, mostly, who could smell gunsmoke months away, and who could not afford to wait for it.

She had known Vince would be looking for a job. The dust on both himself and his pony told her he had ridden a long way south to Indian Valley. He was hired almost before he knew it, given the task of driving the flat wagon back to the ranch. Sam Packard, who usually drove, had decided at the last moment to remain behind for a talk with Cyrus Kendall, president of the Merchant's Bank.

From the start, despite a masterful hand on the reins, Vince had been in trouble. For some reason, the brakes would not hold, although Stella herself had inspected them before she and her father had left the ranch that morning. There had been no trouble on the way to town. But as the trail steepened, it was all Vince could do to hold the spirited team

By WILLIAM RAYNOR

A few moments later she kissed him. She couldn't explain why. But, before she knew it, she was in his arms.

in check. Gradually they quickened their pace as the entire weight of the heavily laden wagon urged them on, finally breaking into a frenzied gallop impossible to restrain. Stella's first thought was to jump, but fear froze her to the seat. Then she felt strong arms around her. The next second she landed with a thud, which almost drove the air from her lungs. The cowpoke had managed to fall, so that he took her entire weight on his body.

A few moments later she kissed him. She couldn't explain why. She saw the cocky grin on his sun-tanned face, looked into his smiling blue eyes, and before she knew it she was in his arms, still shuddering over their narrow escape from death or injury.

Later, they discovered grease on the brake bands. Someone had meant to strike at her father who ordinarily would have been in the wagon. War had been declared on the Circle P.

And with every rustler raid, Stella found herself drawn closer to the reliable Montanan. But now everything would change. Vince was leaving. Even now, he stood beside his fully loaded sorrel by the bunkhouse. She forced a smile as she approached him.

"I SEE you haven't changed your mind about staying on," she began.

He shook his head. "Can't see how it would help any. We've been fighting Bull Thompson for six weeks. But he's still running off with all the profits."

"But that's why we need the help of every hand we can get. We're so short of men now, we can't keep tabs on all the stock. If you quit us, we'll be worse off than ever!"

She hadn't meant to go that far. After all, why should he remain? A few moonlight kisses? They'd both been kissed before. Why should either of them regard such kisses binding. Yet, from the moment she had first given him her lips, she had regretted every other kiss she had perhaps wantonly offered in the past.

He sensed her acute distress and placed his large hands about her shoulders. "I'm not running out, darling," he whispered huskily, "I'm just trading this job for a full-time one of hunting down Bull Thompson. It's the only chance we have." Then, further words unnecessary, he bent and pressed his lips to hers.

Joyously her arms went about his neck. He wasn't letting her down.

But their embrace was altogether too brief, as the footsteps of Rick Hanson, Circle P ramrod, caused him to release her. While he must have seen them kiss, he gave no indication of it.

"Here's your pay, Farley," he began abruptly. "Let's hope it's the last Circle P dinero you draw!"

His words were challenging. Vince faced the topkick. "Meaning what?"

Hanson spat deliberately. "The Circle P never had any trouble with Thompson until you signed on. Now that you're leaving, maybe it will end."

Because of Stella's obvious preference for Vince's company, Hanson had been itching for a fight for weeks. But she couldn't let them battle now. Instinctively she placed a restraining hand on the tense arm of the Montanan. It was as though she had gripped a charged wire. But Vince had more control than Stella realized. Slowly she felt him relax, although his eyes never left those of the ramrod.

"Maybe you're right, Hanson," he snapped. "I reckon I won't be hard to find in any case." Then, deliberately turning his back on the ramrod, he spoke softly to Stella. "There are more ways than one of skinning the cat. Even the mountain had to come to Mohammed, when Mohammed would not come to the mountain." He threw a leg over the sorrel and pointed the pony toward town. "I'll be riding back one of these days," he said simply. "I reckon you'll be waiting."

And Stella, watching his muscular figure recede into the distance, knew he was right.

FOR a while it looked as though Rick Hanson's insulting words were prophetic. Three weeks passed without a single raid by Thompson's gang. If it weren't for the bank foreclosing on the Boxcar and Lazy M ranches, there would be nothing to show that the rustlers had ever hit Indian Valley. But the news that Rick Hanson brought back from town was even better. Vince had talked the town council into appointing him and three others as acting deputy marshals, with the job of bringing in Bull Thompson. He was working for her, despite the gnawing doubts which had begun to torment her as day followed day without word from the taciturn Montanan.

Then the outlaws struck with a fury that made their earlier efforts look like child's play. In three nights, over a hundred head of blooded stock were driven off, despite the blazing guns of the Circle P riders. The loss crippled Sam Packard more than he would like known. From the sale of the beef, he had hoped to meet the bank's notes. Now Cyrus Kendall would have to be put off a bit.

Cursing the freak accident of two months ago, which had placed his leg in a plaster cast, he sent his ramrod into town to confer with the banker. Stella, welcoming the opportunity to see Vince after a month's separation, followed.

Despite his promises, Vince had sent her no word of his activities since his departure. What stories the hands had brought in were discomforting. It was

(Continued on page 76)

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Trouble in Indian Valley

(Continued from page 74)

said that Vince did little but hang around one of the town's toughest cabaret's every night.

But he was seated in the county office, idly looking through an old newspaper, when she entered. He looked up in surprise.

"Stella! What are you doing here? I thought just about every hand not out chasing Thompson would be tied up with the stock at the ranch. Three of the boys from this office are scouting the hills now."

Even though he was smiling, Stella could sense that he was uncomfortable in her presence.

"It's the same old story," he continued. "Thompson is smart. He knows every move we make!"

"That's funny, isn't it?" Rick Hanson said, his business at the bank completed. He had just then stepped into the office to join them. Evidently things had not gone well with Rick. He was boiling mad. "You'd almost think Thompson had spotters in the hills. The local outfits, or what there are left of them, have given orders to shoot first and ask questions after, when it comes to strangers riding in the backlands. But you local deputies are not included, unfortunately."

THIS time, Vince did not need Stella's restraining arm to prevent a fight. He had other plans. "Everyone's entitled to his own opinions, I reckon," he drawled, "but if it makes you sleep easier, I haven't been outside of town in three weeks."

It was Hanson's big chance, and he made the most of it. "And I guess the whole town knows why, too. You've been too busy hanging around La Golendrina, and making passes at Bull Thompson's girl friend, Lolita!"

Stella gasped as Vince went red under the foreman's jibes. So that was the reason he had been avoiding her! Fighting desperately to keep the tears from her eyes, she wheeled abruptly and fled from the office. If Vince had offered a single word in explanation, she would have accepted it gladly. But he had remained silent, while the red flush of guilt spread across his features.

Never very good at masking her feelings, the thought of the man she loved, in the arms of another, left a choking sensation in her breast that she could not overcome. And she did love him, she realized hopelessly, no matter how things had turned out. She could still taste the brisk, warm kiss he had planted on her willing lips before he had deserted the ranch a month ago, for the wild cantina which Bull Thompson himself had once used as his headquarters.

At La Golendrina, Bull had maintained a perpetual spree, which included raw *tequilla*, gambling and women, the most recent of whom, and certainly the most beautiful, was the dancer, Lolita. There had been another dancer, a year or so back. A spirited thing named Carmen, who finally committed suicide.

Thompson was still clear of the law at that time. Not until a drygulched Two Bar Cross rider managed to hang on to life long enough to cough out the name of the man who had ambushed him did Bull become a fugitive. Then his activities became more daring than ever. Once under cover of a raid, he had ridden into town and fanned three slugs into the body of a foolhardy young cowpoke who had been reportedly interested in Lolita.

BUT such thoughts were not helping Stella now. If Vince had walked out of her life, there still remained the ranch. And from the foreman's dejected appearance, as they jogged along, it was plain that the bank had refused to renew her father's notes. That meant an immediate, off-season round-up of the

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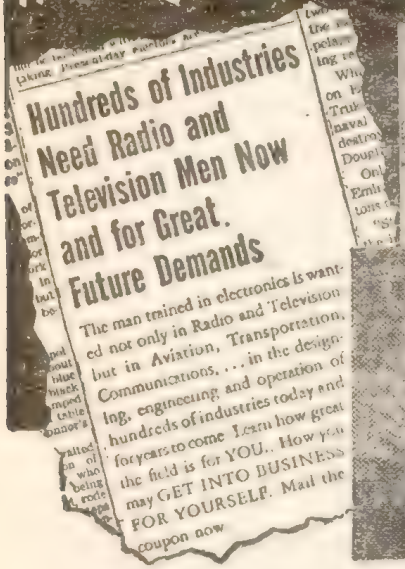

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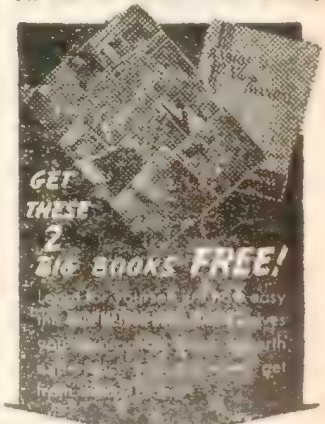

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scrub cattle, and a long drive to the railroad at Mesa Junction, while the core of the blooded stock was left behind under loose guard. It was an unfortunate situation, but they had no choice.

One thing about the drive. It kept her mind off Vince. While she was in the saddle, she hadn't time to think, and at night she was too tired to lie awake and brood. There were far more cattle in the bush than had been estimated. It now looked like over four hundred head could be started overland to the railroad at the end of the week, without completely stripping the place. If Thompson's raiders would hold off until after the drive was over, the Circle P could yet be saved. The balance of the stock could be shifted to the lower pastures, where, under adequate guard, they would be safe from the raiders.

But Thompson had not been idle. On the day before the overland drive was to start, Pete Grayson of the Panhandle rode in to announce that his outfit had lost twenty head the night before. Three of the new deputy marshals were now combing the hills for the rustlers.

"Vince Farley will join them in a couple of days," he added after a moment. "Tonight he's throwing a shindig at La Golendrina, so the boys can see Lolita dance for the last time. They're getting married tomorrow!"

Listening to the puncher, Stella felt as though she had been dealt a sledgehammer blow. It was a new hurt searing the scars she had hoped to drive from her mind with hard work. She couldn't face it. She had to escape, get away for a few hours and think, or she would go mad! Quietly she saddled her paint, and without a word to anybody rode into the night.

Once clear of the camp, she gave her pony its head, not caring where she went. The cool night breeze whipped at her moist cheeks, wiping away the silent tears she made no effort to stem. It was over an hour before a sense of balance returned to her. Even then, she was in no mood to face the others at the main camp. Her pony had carried her to within a few miles of a small pocket of steers which had been left with two hands, several miles up the trail. The original plan had been to push the cattle into the main herd as it passed on the way to the railroad the following morning.

SOMETHING was wrong, she realized, as she rounded the patch of stately pine, beyond which the small herd was to have gathered for the night. A few smouldering embers still remained of the campfire, but of the two hands and cattle there was no sign. As she approached within a few feet of the fire, her worst fears were realized. Sprawled grotesquely at her feet was young Dick Bailey, a half dozen bullets in his body. Twenty feet beyond was Shorty Andrews. Evidently he had crawled there before his strength gave out. He was still alive, but fading fast. A bloodstained neckerchief pressed to his side testified to his own feeble attempts to help himself. Through some miracle, he managed to regain consciousness at the touch of her hand on his brow. A faint spark of recognition lit his tired eyes. Slowly, gasping in pain with every breath, he forced out the story of the raid.

Believing him dead, the outlaws had discussed their plans to snatch the Circle P blooded stock that evening. Under cover of the raid, Thompson would ride into town, to murder Vince at La Golendrina!

The town lay in the opposite direction to the herd. She would not have time to warn both Vince and her own men. Even if she did save the deputy marshal, he would still marry Lolita. There was only one logical course to pursue. But she ignored it. The man she loved was in danger. She had to help him, no matter what it cost!

Just what she would do upon her arrival at La Golendrina, she did not know. The place had been Thompson's headquarters too long for her to believe he had no friends among its patrons. She could burst in with a cry of warning on her lips. She would have to sneak in quietly, and get Vince out before anyone realized what was happening.

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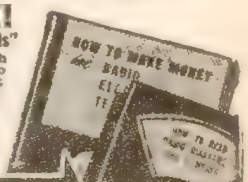

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Speed was essential. Without bothering to tie her paint to the hitching rack, she slid between the swinging doors. At first, the stench of stale whisky, cigarette smoke, and coarse food almost turned her stomach. Fortunately, the light was bad. In her faded levis, her hair tucked securely beneath her battered stetson, she looked like any slim young puncher out to blow a month's wages in a few wild hours.

Slowly, she began to inch her way along the wall to the bar, against which, oblivious to his peril, Vince was leaning comfortably. Then, abruptly she felt herself being pushed aside, as the small band struck up a wild tropical tune.

"Lolita!"

A FLASH of gay color made a spectacular entrance. One look at the girl, and Stella could understand the men's reaction to her dark beauty. Haughtily, the dancer's jet black eyes flashed across the motley crowd, finally settling on Vince. Her lips drew back, exposing the whiteness of her flawless teeth. The band hit a high note, and instantaneously the girl was transformed into a whirlwind of color and flame. Her well-rounded shoulders, writhing and naked, complemented the bronzed symmetry of her legs, as she whirled faster and faster to the savage music.

Still maintaining the primitive rhythm, Lolita approached her future husband, her brown arms encircling his neck, her moist red lips brushing his ear for a fraction of a second.

Then, acting as if he, too, were part of the bizarre spectacle, the Montanan's strong left arm swept out, hurling the dancer halfway across the floor. At the same instant, his right hand came up, an ugly Smith and Wesson cocked dangerously.

There was a deafening crash in her ear. Stella felt the angry buzz of a forty-four slug blaze past her toward the deputy marshal. She was too late! Bull Thompson was silhouetted against the swinging doors, and as the cantina cleared magically, Stella was directly in the line of fire!

Even as she threw herself to the floor, she felt her stetson lifted from her head as one of Thompson's slugs tore by.

Thompson had not come alone. Framed in the window, a black Colt poised murderously, was one of his killer band.

Even so, Vince was not without his own cards. A thick adobe pillar, located at one end of the bar, gave him momentary protection from both adversaries. He sent a reckless shot in Thompson's direction, the slug going far high of its mark as he deliberately shot above Stella.

Sooner or later, one of the outlaws must catch him in a murderous crossfire. Horror-stricken, Stella waited for the inevitable, inwardly raging that she had not brought a weapon of her own. Then, help came from unexpected quarters. Charging through the swinging doors, Rick Hanson, the foreman, sized up the situation at a glance and clipped Thompson from behind in a flying tackle. The foolhardy move almost proved to be his last. The charge left the ramrod's back open to the killer in the window.

"Vince. The window!"

Stella's warning was followed a split second later by the sharp crack of a six-gun. The second outlaw toppled forward, his weapon sliding from lifeless fingers.

But Thompson was still full of fight. Drawing up his great legs beneath his adversary, he sent the topkick flying across the room. At the same time, his gun hand came up with murder gripped in every finger.

He never fired. From a sprawling position on the floor, where he had been hurtled, Rick Hanson coldly pumped two slugs over the helpless girl, into the face of the outlaw chief. It was all over.

STELLA found herself in Vince's arms, her lips throbbing fiercely under his. Then, over his shoulder, the sigh of the young dancer, standing anxiously in the background, brought her back to reality. She struggled to release herself. "Lolita," she gasped in humiliation. "The girl you're going to marry."

She felt his arms relax. Then a slow

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grin broke out upon his face. "Looks like Thompson wasn't the only one fooled by that masquerade," he began. "But we had to make it realistic, or he never would have bitten."

Stella looked at him in amazement. "You mean you went through all that, even announcing a fake marriage, just to make Thompson mad enough to come in and kill you?"

He shrugged. "It was tonight or never. I knew we'd never get him any other way."

"But the girl, where does she fit in?" This time it was Rick Hanson who asked the question.

"Don't you remember that girl, Carmen, who committed suicide about a year ago, after Thompson left her for another woman? The two girls are sisters. Lolita was determined to make Thompson pay for her sister's death. But she couldn't do much by herself. That's where I came in."

He turned once more to Stella. "The reason I was so sure Thompson would strike tonight was that he had to prevent the Circle P from shipping its beef, at all costs. If your dad could have been pevented from meeting his note, the bank would take over. Controlling the waters of the Rio Clara, Cyrus Kendall could have taken over the entire valley on his own terms. Thompson has been working for him from the start."

The mention of the ranch caused the blood to drain from Stella's face. "The herd," she gasped. "It was to be raided tonight!"

"It was!" Again Rick Hanson spoke up. "Just a few minutes after you rode out of camp in such an all fired hurry, Curley Peters of the Bar Cross rode in with about fifty men he'd gathered from the various ranches. This crazy boy friend of yours was so sure his plans would work he arranged for as beautiful an ambush as has been seen since the Indians got Custer. If there is anything left of the Thompson gang now, it's headed for the border at top speed."

He turned to the Montanan.

"I guess we old-timers, like me and Sam Packard, are getting soft. Here, the pair of us have been bringing up Stella so long, we never stopped to think that some day we'd need help with both her and the Circle P. Looks like we sure got it!"

And Stella, with Vince's long arm wrapped possessively around her waist, agreed.

Kathie Rides Alone

(Continued from page 15)

DOROTHEA shouted above the music now, called to the men: "Come on. I'll dance with you! I'll dance with all of you!"

The men hesitated. Rusty glared at Kathie, strode up and took Dorothea in his arms.

The rest of the men laughed. They crowded around him, cut in on him. All of them took turns dancing with Dorothea, acting as though there were no other women in the hall.

Rusty reclaimed Dorothea, smiled at her with the kind of a smile that once had been special for Kathie. The other men applauded, clapped their hands in time to the music.

One of the women, Mrs. Russell, timidly arose and went to her husband, tapped him on the arm, said something to him. They started dancing. Two more women deserted. The rest sat glumly, waiting.

Kathie gathered the folds of her skirt, swept to the door and went out to the porch.

She knew that Rusty was smiling at Dorothea that way just to get even. But,

although she knew it was that, she couldn't stand it, couldn't stay there and watch the close way Rusty held the girl while they stepped to the music of the fiddlers.

She breathed in the deep, cool evening air. Her hands gripped the porch railing.

Dorothea was pretty. She had a clinging way of making men feel she was dependent upon them. And Rusty was handsome. He was furious at Kathie.

No! She wouldn't let herself think such things. Rusty loved her. *He wouldn't let Dorothea mean anything to him.*

"Kathie?" It was Vaughn on the porch beside her. "I'm extremely sorry that things developed in this manner," he said. "Some of the women are still holding out."

"Kathie frowned. "If it hadn't been for Dorothea, the men would have given in."

"Perhaps they still may concede." Vaughn took her hand. "They may have learned enough. My regret is that you have been hurt."

"You're so very kind, Vaughn."

"Kathie—the other day when you visited me—" He put his arm around her. "I've been thinking about that, Kathie." Smoothly he drew her closer to him.

Kathie turned her head.

As she turned, she heard laughter from the doorway behind her, Rusty's laugh. It was joined by a high, girlish laughter, Dorothea's.

".... I'm just a woman," Dorothea was saying. "I can't believe in all these silly ideas of women trying to run things. My goodness, that's what men are for —to help a girl and to decide things."

"You're very much a woman," Rusty said.

Rusty, saying that to Dorothea!

Their voices came nearer. Suddenly, Kathie reached up her hands and pulled down Vaughn's head and kissed him. She kissed him fully, angrily.

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Rusty saw her as she wanted him to. "Kathie!"

She kept her arms around Vaughn and kissed him again, laughed up at him. *There, Rusty Collins,* she stormed inwardly, *I guess now you won't think you're so smart. Telling Dorothea she's quite a woman. I'm quite a woman too!*

Rusty said her name again softly. "Kathie." As though he were saying it to himself.

She heard his boots on the wooden planks, walking away from her. The softer tap of Dorothea's shoes, Dorothea following him.

Kathie broke from Vaughn's arms. She shut her eyes. She felt weak, spent by her anger, truly frightened now, and she realized the impulsive thing she had had done. "Oh, Rusty . . . Rusty . . ."

"So that was it," Vaughn said.

She had hurt Vaughn too. She had used Vaughn to hurt Rusty. She had made a mess of everything. "Please . . . I don't want to talk—not now—"

She turned away from Vaughn, hurried back to the door.

Head down, Kathie didn't see the woman in the doorway until she bumped into her. It was Vaughn's sister, Mildred. How long had Mildred been standing there?

Mildred's eyes burned with hate. Her mouth was a bitter slash. "Quite an exhibition!" Kathie tried to push past her into the room to find Pa. But Mildred held her, fingers digging Kathie's arm. "Leave Vaughn alone! I'm warning you —leave Vaughn alone!"

CHAPTER VI

Brotherly Love

KATHIE rode home in the wagon with Pa. "Rusty's drivin' Dorothea home," he told her stiffly.

He didn't need to tell her that. He didn't need to make it that much worse. Couldn't Pa understand what she had gone through? Didn't he know what it meant to take home a breaking heart?

"I'm 'shamed of you," Pa said. "'Shamed you're my daughter. Makin' men fight with their wives, startin' quarrels all over Tyler. All that trouble—"

"Go ahead. Punish me."

"No." He shook his head. "I ain't going to punish you, Kathie. I reckon you've been punished enough—losin' Rusty."

"Losing—" She couldn't say the word. "Oh, no. Rusty's angry, maybe. He's gone with Dorothea because he's trying to make me jealous. But Rusty wouldn't—"

"Wasn't anger I saw when Rusty put Dorothea into her wagon." Pa looked straight ahead. "Dorothea's a very pretty girl. What's more, she's got sense stacked up under them curls of hers."

Kathie put her hands over her ears. "I won't listen! It's not true!"

She tried to shut out the words, but she heard Pa say: "A man'll take just so much. Then he gits. If you want Rusty, you'd better go crawlin' on your knees to him—and fast."

"Rusty loves me." She tried to make it sound sure. "I know that. He'll come back to me."

Kathie went to bed, and she lay there and saw it all again—the dance and Rusty's anger. She rolled over and put her face against the pillows and squeezed shut her eyes, and she heard it all again —Rusty's laughter and Dorothea's laughter.

She couldn't sleep. She didn't want to sleep for fear the real nightmare would be worse than what she remembered. Awake, she could lie to herself and argue that, somehow, it would all work out. She could remind herself of Rusty's love.

Pa's words drummed in her mind. *"If you want Rusty, you'd better go crawlin' to him on your knees—and fast."*

Morning came and darkness left the room and the sun flooded it. But it did no good. The darkness of fear was still there, locked tight around her heart. The sun was no more than a mockery, reminding her of mornings her heart had sung.

Kathie dressed and debated. She wouldn't crawl to Rusty. She couldn't do that. She just wasn't made for crawling —to anybody. But she would go to the Bar X and see Aunt Ellen, talk to her.

Maybe Rusty would happen to be there. And, maybe—

Kathie saddled the calico mare and followed the fence line across the rise, rode down to the stream and along it.

The trees close to the water shaded her from the heat of the morning's sun, but there was no shield against the hot tightness inside, the dryness in her throat no water could slake.

She was halfway to the Bar X when she saw the dust of an approaching horse. Kathie reined in, waited.

The horse was coming this way, straight across. Maybe it was Rusty coming to see her! Who else would take this shortcut to the Circle Cross?

AS the horse came closer, she saw, with a sudden sinking of the wishful thought, that it wasn't Rusty. She shaded her eyes against the sun for a better look. Aunt Ellen!

Aunt Ellen, who seldom rode a horse, riding this way, riding hard, her skirt flapping in the wind as she sat sidesaddle, urging the horse toward the Circle Cross.

Something must be wrong. Very wrong.

Kathie touched her spurs, sped forward to meet her.

"Kathie!" Aunt Ellen was out of breath. "There's—going to be—trouble! Rusty and the—rest of the men have called a meeting in town. They're—going to run Vaughn out of Tyler!"

"It's because Rusty is mad at me." Kathie's fingers gripped the hot leather reins. "If they do that to Vaughn, it will be my fault. . . .I'll be to blame."

"Nothing much you can do now."

"I can warn Vaughn and Mildred." Kathie wheeled her horse. "I must do that." She touched her heels. "I must!"

She heard Aunt Ellen shout: "Rusty will be madder than ever, and you—"

The rest of the shout was lost. Kathie's own anger mounted as she raced the mare. It was so unfair of the men to turn against Vaughn—they could accuse him

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of nothing except trying to bring civilizing influences to this raw land where men acted on impulse instead of reason. He must have a chance to defend himself.

Kathie kneed the horse to the cut that swung away from the road and across the hill. The sun sweated her head, stuck her shirt to her back. Shrubs slapped at her legs. Jolted in the saddle, hunched there, she urged the horse down the rocky slope and back to the road. She raced forward again. There must be time. She couldn't have this on her conscience.

Swinging into Tyler's main street, she slowed the mare so as not to attract attention. She saw the men in front of the Lucky Seven, grouped around Rusty, their horses hitched to the rail.

Kathie moved past. She saw Rusty break away from the group. He shouted. She didn't stop.

She headed for the two cabins. She swung down, shoved open Vaughn's cabin door without knocking. "Vaughn! The men are—"

Her words died.

Vaughn had his arms tight around Mildred. He was kissing her. He was kissing Mildred the way no man would kiss his sister!

They pulled apart. Mildred turned on her. "What do you mean, breaking in here like that?"

"You're not Vaughn's sister!"

Mildred's face went white. Vaughn blustered: "You mustn't jump to conclusions, Kathie. . . If you'll let me explain—"

He faced her. His eyes evaded hers. But, she knew. It was the only answer. "You were going to collect money for the school and run out with it," Kathie accused. "You and that woman!"

They heard the horses then, the men riding hard.

Vaughn wheeled around, ran to the window. "What's that?"

"They're coming for you!" Kathie's voice rose. "The men of Tyler are coming to get you—and I'm glad—glad!"

CHAPTER VII

Rusty Breaks the Strike

RUSTY STEPPED into the doorway, holding a gun. He leveled it. "All right, professor—or whoever you are—there's a stage leaving Tyler in half an hour and it's going your way. We've got up a little farewell party—to make sure you and your sister don't miss the stage."

"You're making a mistake, gentlemen," Vaughn said to Rusty and the others crowding the doorway. "I've taken no money from you. . . . I'm guilty of no crime. There may be ill-feeling, but—"

"You were going to take the money we voted to build the school. If that didn't work, you'd have tried some other swindling scheme. Maybe we can't prove anything—but we don't need to skin a polecat to know what it is."

Kathie went to him. "You're right, Rusty. Mildred isn't even his sister. He wouldn't be pretending if—"

Rusty pushed Kathie away without turning his head. He kept the gun on Vaughn with his other hand. "You came to warn him, Kathie."

"I was so wrong. . . . I didn't know—"

As though he hadn't heard Kathie at all, he spoke to Vaughn. "We'll wait while you and the woman pack. But it better not be long. The boys are kind of impatient. I had to talk hard to keep them from shooting you. They'd still like to—don't try anything slick."

Rusty went back to his stallion. Kathie followed him. She tried to get him to look at her so she could tell him with eyes. She couldn't beg with words here, in front of these men.

Rusty kept his eyes fixed hard on the cabin door.

Kathie went to her own horse, climbed up.

Vaughn and Mildred didn't take long. They had most of their things packed and waiting.

The procession moved down the street toward the stage depot, collecting a larger crowd as it went. Some followed in the street behind the men. Others trailed along the plank walk.

In front of the Lucky Seven, Kathie saw Dorothea join the group. Rusty looked at Kathie for an instant, the hardness still in his eyes. He twisted in the saddle, waved briefly to Dorothea, smiled at her. Kathie knew the girl had been waiting there for Rusty to return.

Silently, Vaughn and Mildred climbed into the stage. Vaughn started to speak at once. Mildred took his arm, shook her head, whispered something to him.

The men dismounted. Kathie climbed down. Dorothea moved next to Rusty.

The stage rolled away. The silence was broken only by the sound of horses' hoofs and by the squeaking of the stage wheels. The men's eyes were upon the cloud of dust behind the wheels.

"And that does it." Rusty broke the silence. Dorothea hugged his arm, looked up at him adoringly.

Rusty patted her hand, took his fingers away. "And I aim to end this kiss strike and the rest of the nonsense too—right here and now."

Angrily, he crossed to Kathie. Roughly, he took her into his arms. He kissed her.

"Rusty! Oh, Rusty!"

His lips went soft against hers. His arms tightened.

Then he thrust her away from him, as abruptly as he had taken her into his arms. "And that ends that too," Rusty said.

He walked back to Dorothea, offered her his arm. "Shall we go?"

The crowd laughed.

Kathie felt hot tears of humiliation sting her eyes. She lowered her head. "Rusty. . ." She whispered his name. "You can't—hate me that much, Rusty—to do that to me."

CHAPTER VIII

And She Could Cook

PA PUT the knife and fork across his supper plate, the food upon the plate uneaten. He frowned at Kathie's plate. "You should eat somethin'," he said.

She shook her head without looking up.

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"I reckon you heard 'bout the meetin'." He waited. When she didn't answer, he went on: "The men talked it over and decided if the women folks really were hankerin' after a school so much, we'd collect a little money amongst ourselves and build us a small school. No fancy stuff, but—" He stopped. "You ain't listenin' to me, Kathie. Don't you care?"

She nodded slightly. "Yes. It's nice about the school."

"Nice!" he exploded. He squinted at her. "Don't tell me you're still cryin' over that perfesser. That ain't why you—"

"I hate him— I hate him! I—" A single sob broke her words. "I want Rusty, and now he and Dorothea—"

"Quit whinin'!"

"I'm not."

Pa shoved back his chair. "I told you the other night I was 'shamed of you. I'm even more 'shamed now. Where's your spunk, gal? You rope like a man and you ride like a man, but you're actin' now like a snivelin' woman. That ain't the way I raised you." He came over to her. "You fought enough agin Rusty. Why don't you do a little fightin' for him?"

"I tried to talk to him. I—"

"Talk!" He lifted his hands. "I reckon if I was a gal who loved a man, I'd do somethin' 'sides talk. I reckon I'd try to please him with somethin' he likes. I'd fight that clingin' Dorothea at her own game." There was a hint of a smile around his eyes. "I'm kind of hankerin' for a bit of dessert. You ever make that berry cake?"

"Berry cake? I baked the cake part, but I—" Kathie stopped. She stood up. "Berry cake!" She went over and got out the bowl of berries and the cream. "Do you—"

"I reckon Rusty might be havin' supper 'bout same time's we are," Pa chuckled. "Better wrap it and take it separate, mix it over there."

"Oh, Pa." Kathie threw her arms around him. She wrapped the cake halves in a strip of cloth. "And don't worry about my fighting. Rusty's mine. He's going to stay mine!"

IT wasn't easy to ride to the Bar X, holding the berries and the cream and the cake halves, even if they were wrapped in one package. Kathie had to ride slowly all the way.

There was no one in the Collins' kitchen. Listening, Kathie heard voices in the other room, Aunt Ellen asking something, Rusty grunting an answer. Kathie spread the makings of the cake on the table.

"Don't be so glum," Aunt Ellen was saying. "It's all over now. You've won and that's the end of it. We women are getting a school and we're getting the understanding we wanted. You've had a good meal and—"

"I'm a fool," Rusty said. "I was sore and hurt and stubborn, and I tried to talk myself into liking Dorothea. Then Dorothea started getting serious about it and I knew—"

"That you didn't want her?"

"'Course I didn't want her. I told her so. But Kathie'll never forgive me now for the way I shamed her in front of everybody. I wouldn't blame her either."

"But you love her," Aunt Ellen put in. "Well, why not do something about it?"

"Do you think—"

"Kathie loves you, doesn't she?" Aunt Ellen's voice was gentle. "Now don't worry about it. I'll bring in your dessert and—"

"Dessert! How can you talk about food as if nothing was wrong?"

Kathie pushed open the door.

"It's a very special dessert, Rusty," Kathie said softly.

He gaped at her. "Kathie!"

Then he jumped up. His chair tipped and fell. "Kathie!"

The cake dropped from her hands. It fell to the floor with a splash.

Rusty held his arms around her. He smiled his special smile, the one that belonged to her. "Don't worry . . . I've got my dessert," he said. "Right here."

It wasn't very cultured, the way they kissed. It wasn't polite and flossy. There was something of the rough life-fullness of the frontier in their embrace. It was just plain real.

Honeymoon Holdup

(Continued from page 37)

Arthur Fordyce, mounted on a horse, the pair of them heading the posse that bunched up suddenly.

Fordyce called out, moving to dismount.

"Elizabeth? Thank God, you're all right! That's my fiancée, Sheriff. Tom Brent forced her to leave with him to save himself! Elizabeth, everything will be over in a little while. Sheriff, you've got the warrant for Brent. We'll provide a horse for my fiancée."

Sheriff Blount cleared his throat. Libby stood there on the wide porch, not yet speaking, looking at the wonderful valley of the Triangle.

"You don't hafta be scared, young lady!" boomed Sheriff Blount suddenly.

"There won't be any gun-play! We met Doc Lathrop, so I'll just put a deputy guardin' Brent till he can be took to jail!"

Libby looked at Arthur Fordyce. How different he seemed from what he had been up until yesterday. She wasn't seeing the dignified, reserved banker of Lynchburg. She wasn't even thinking about security or about being the "first lady" of Cobalt county.

No. She was seeing a coward, shooting another man in the back. More than that, Tom Brent's kiss was still burning her lips, still tingling along every nerve in her lithesome body.

Then Libby was talking, every word coming clearly into a silence that was broken only by the occasional jingling of horses's gear.

"I'm not a bit scared, Sheriff," announced Libby. "There won't be any gun-play, but if there should be any such idea, I'll shoot the first man who tries to enter Tom Brent's house."

Sheriff Blount started to bluster, but Libby put out her hand and he stopped.

"If there's a warrant served on Tom Brent, I'll go to the courthouse and swear out another warrant for the man who shot Tom Brent in the back, when he was unarmed, and after he had paid off,

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in full, a note held on the Triangle ranch."

"Elizabeth!" cried Fordyce. "What are you talking about? Why are you lying? Has Tom Brent—"

Libby's voice was no longer calm. Her next words exploded on the heat of her temper.

"I saw Tom Brent settle in full for the Triangle note! I saw him knock you down when you tried to grab the note back from him, after he had proved you had hired rustlers to raid his cattle! Then I saw a—what you'd call out here—a sneakin' coyote shoot Tom Brent in the back!"

"There's not a word of truth—" began Fordyce.

"Suppose I tell you Tom Brent is dead?"

HER unexpected words, as much to Libby as to the sheriff and his citizen posse, produced a breathless hush.

Arthur Fordyce stared, and his face went a little gray. Sheriff Blount stared, twisting at his mustache.

"Now, Fordyce, tell the sheriff and your friends why you wrote to me two months ago that we would spend our honeymoon in this beautiful valley, in the Triangle ranchhouse? You said—but wait, I'll read one paragraph from your letter, Arthur."

Fordyce started toward the porch. A member of the posse stepped in front of the banker and said: "The lady is doin' the talkin', *Mister* Fordyce!"

Libby took the folded paper from the bosom of her waist.

"It is the ending of a letter," she said. "It reads, 'We will have our honeymoon in the house that will be our future home. It is in the most beautiful valley in the state. The place is called the Triangle ranch, and I have a deal on to take over the place in the near future. I know you will be very happy there.' "

Then Libby said: "This letter is signed, 'Devotedly, Arthur.' I don't know about such things, but I understand now that Mr. Fordyce was referring to a deal known to you folks as rustling cattle. All of you probably know a man named Joe Billings—?"

"That's me, Joe Billings, owner of the Two-Spot saloon!"

"Do you remember, Mr. Billings—"

Fordyce broke in. "Don't you talk, Billings! I'll close out your place—"

"An' the hell to you, I say, beggin' pardon, miss!" cut in bald Joe Billings.

"How many cows did Mr. Fordyce tell you had been stolen from Tom Brent?"

"One hund'ed an' fifty-two, miss!"

"Had you heard Tom Brent or Buck Hanley or anyone else tell the number of stolen cows, Mr. Billings?"

"Come to think of it, miss, nope."

"I think that's all, gentlemen," said Libby. "The warrant I'll swear out for the shooting of Tom Brent will include—"

Libby did not finish speaking. Uttering an oath, Arthur Fordyce jumped for his horse. He swung the animal and prodded him into a run. Sheriff Blount cursed and was making for his saddle.

But Libby smiled then, watching Fordyce's bulky figure bouncing in the saddle of his fleeing horse.

"Please, let him go," requested Libby. "Poor Arthur. I'm afraid he won't be coming back to Lynchburg."

"But—but murder, Miss Williams?" sputtered Sheriff Blount. "It's my bounden duty to put Fordyce in jail."

"There has been no murder, Sheriff," said Libby. "I said only 'suppose I told you Tom Brent was dead,' which he isn't. Tom will be well in no time at all. I just thought what any coward would do, who thinks he has killed another man by shooting him in the back."

A sudden cheer went up. The citizens' posse turned the horses. Libby went slowly into the house. Buck Hanley hurried to meet her.

"Please, miss, but the boss is clean out of his head," stated Buck. "He's sayin' I should go right off an' bring the sky pilot out from Lynchburg to perform a marryin'—"

"He'd better not be out of his head," said Libby, and her words were like a song. "After all, I've gone through a lot over a promise that I'd have a honeymoon in the Triangle ranchhouse."

Rodeo Rainbow

(Continued from page 55)

Alyce laughed again. "His taste runs to—dresses like that."

Mack was looking at the dress, finding her eyes, telling Berry he wanted to believe her. But, slowly, doubt grew in his face. "Well?"

"I won the money, gambling."

"Gambling? You gambled our ranch money? And you wouldn't let me spend a cent—even for a new saddle!"

How could she explain that the money was Charlie's. She put her hands on his arm. "Not our money, Mack."

"Whose, then?" He pulled his arm away.

"Well, Tex sort of loaned—"

Mack pushed her aside. He seemed to be fighting for every step he took.

Berry called after him. The whisper caught in her throat. "Mack . . ."

He didn't turn.

Alyce seemed amused. "You're not very smart about men, honey. Tex may act gay, but he's mine." Alyce stepped closer to Berry. "Tex wants you to go with him to Hollywood, doesn't he?" Her eyes went hard. "Well, he won't take you. I'm keeping Tex." The amused look came back. "And having my fun too."

SOMEHOW, Berry made her way back to her own tent. She threw herself on the cot, held the sides of the cot with her hands, held herself in.

She lay there minutes, unable to think. She had to get to Mack, explain to him about the clothes. If she could talk to him alone, tell him the truth . . . and tell him she wanted him—

Two hours before the afternoon events. Tex would be gone by then, gone to Hollywood alone.

Berry stood. She poured a basin of water and splashed it on her face with her hands. Carefully, she wiped her eyes.

Pulling the black dress roughly over her head, her fingers hating the touch of it, she stripped the stockings from her

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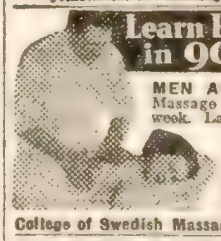

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legs and put on her old plaid shirt and levis. She jammed her feet into her boots and felt more like herself again.

She headed toward the horse corral. Mack would show up there within the next hour, to get their horses for the afternoon events. *Unless he isn't going to enter.* She rejected that. *We have to win this afternoon. Getting the Bar X depends upon it.*

She went around the back end of the chutes, under the grandstand and past the refreshment shack with its strong smell of hot dogs and orange juice and the too-sugary odor of the candy spinning machine.

Rounding the corner, Berry looked across the flat to the corral, searching for Mack's tall figure among the hands and contestants already there. Her gaze swept beyond the corral to a pile of discarded plank lumber from the stands.

Mack sat atop the lumber, head in his hands. On the ledge of boards beneath him, talking up at him, was Alyce.

Berry couldn't hear what they were saying. She couldn't even see their lips moving from here. But she knew.

Alyce had reached Mack first. Alyce was telling him that Tex had offered to take Berry to Hollywood. Alyce wanted Mack to go to the station and stop it.

As if she would think of going with Tex! Suddenly, Berry smiled. Mack would go to the station. *And when Mack gets there, and finds Tex alone, he'll know all of it was a lie.*

Back in her tent, Berry watched the battered alarm clock with satisfaction. One-ten. One-fifteen.

The train would be leaving now. Mack would know she hadn't gone with Tex.

Berry leaned back on the cot, waiting for Mack to return. She went over in her mind everything he would say and everything she would say. *And then Mack would take her into his arms . . .*

There were bootsteps outside. Mack coming back. Berry picked up her comb, pretended to be busy with her hair.

"Hello." The voice startled her. The comb dropped from her fingers. Tex!

She stood. "But, I thought—"

"I came back for you," Tex said. "You weren't at the station—"

"But you can't be here now. You must leave. Mack will be—"

Tex moved toward her. His arms went around her. They were rough, hard. "You're going to Hollywood with me!" His lips, pressing down on hers, were cruel with demand.

Berry pounded her fists against him. "No!" She broke from him, fell back. "Get out! . . . I told you—I love Mack. I'm going to marry him. And even—"

The other voice cracked from behind Berry like a shot. "You heard her, mister!" It was Mack.

"Mack!" Berry ran to him. She hugged herself to him. "Oh, Mack, I've been so foolish. I love you so much—"

His arm held her tight. His eyes shut. Over his shoulder, Berry saw Alyce. Alyce, frightened.

Mack stepped across to Tex. His fist swung out hard. Just once. It was enough. Tex went sprawling back against the canvas wall. Gingerly, he put his fingers to his famous profile.

"Get up and fight like a man," Mack said, "if you are a man. Get to your feet!"

"Don't you dare hit him again!" Alyce crouched beside Tex, shielding him. "You—you bully!" she shouted at Mack. "You're common and rough and—"

"Yes." Mack smiled a little. "I'm not your type, Alyce. I'm rough and plain and—honest. Like Berry."

"Oh, Mack . . ." Berry lifted her face to his.

He kissed her gently, softly, completely. "Come on," he said, poking his fist playfully at her chin. "We've got a rodeo to win."

There wasn't a hint of rain. The sun was strong and warm and good.

But, walking together, Mack's arm around her, Berry could have sworn she saw a rainbow in the clean blue sky. The end of it dipped down over the far hills to the Bar X ranch. Her ranch and Mack's. It was so much more wonderful than a pot of gold!

Teacher's Pet

(Continued from page 71)

of Paint Rock's reluctant pupils.

"The danged, sneakin' sidewinders!" she said through her nice, white teeth. "The lowdown, greaser chuckwallas! I'll learn 'em!"

Such speech to come from such a lovely mouth.

Marcia pulled the Winchester from the saddle boot with quick hands that displayed remarkable familiarity with the weapon. Even as she levered a shell into the firing chamber, Marcia whipped the rifle to her shoulder.

The flat crack of the Winchester proved Marcia wasn't fooling. One of the raiders stirring up the cattle spun out of his saddle, one hand grabbing at his shoulder. The other rider, apparently uncertain of the strength of this surprise attack, spurred toward the cut gap in the fence.

Some of the cows were spooked, and broke for the opening. As this happened, Marcia raked *Midnight's* ribs and the black horse started at a headlong run down the hill. Marcia's rifle kept on exploding as fast as she could lever in the shells.

She had the reins in her teeth and she was shooting at the leaders of what might become a stampede. The swift ride and the action was reminiscent of some dead-shot performer at a rodeo.

And that was precisely what Marcia Adams had been, back in Texas, paying her schooling by copping top money for all-around gal riders.

The cattle milled, two steers blocked the fence gap. The other rider in the meadow was cutting away toward another section of fence. Near at hand, the fence-cutter saw the black horse thundering down upon him, and he started running toward his ground-reined cayuse several yards away.

The rifle magazine emptied, Marcia freed the lariat at the saddlehorn. She ran out the rope and built a loop, with a speed that would have matched the

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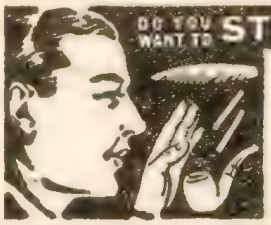

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Don't Waste It!

best that Bill James could do.

The fleeing raider had his .45 out, shooting as he ran. He was forced to jump to one side, to dodge the black horse, and the rope snagged him, dropping to his legs, tightening and jerking him from his feet.

Midnight was a roper, and he had the instinct to set himself as the lariat went taut. The fence-cutter turned a double somersault, landed in a heap, and stayed very quiet.

Marcia made a slight mistake then. She hadn't the heart to give *Midnight* his head and drag the devilment out of the raider. Instead, she was off the horse and clearing the rope to tie up her prisoner.

There was shooting over in the meadow. And Marcia was startled, and turned to see a woman rider cut down the escaping rustler with a short gun. She missed getting a closer view of the unexpected woman.

The one she had roped was given the chance to gain his feet. He struck Marcia solidly on the head with the barrel of his gun. This proved a bad error for the rustler.

A gun cracked from the rise over which Marcia had ridden. The rider wasn't playing 'possum when he fell this time and lay still.

"LAND SAKES, Bill! Shet off yore yammerin' an' fetch me more water from the crick! She ain't got nothin' but a cut on her head! My goshen, Bill! I never seen sech hair! Wisht I had it in place o' this stringy yarn I growed! Git thet water!"

The words were uttered in a nasal twang, but the voice was that of a woman, and she was bathing Marcia's head with a gentle hand.

Marcia opened her eyes, saw a homely, angular face. Marcia tried to sit up.

"Yuh jest keep yoreself quiet like, child," said the woman, pushing Marcia back. "Yuh must be thet schoolma'am, seein' how Bill James is so scairt thet he turned green."

Marcia didn't speak. Bill James? The way he had made a fool of her, cheating his way into her school, pretending he had to have a diploma to marry Lita Carson.

Not until then did it come to Marcia's mind that this wasn't all one-sided. Bill was here. He must have seen what had happened. He couldn't have missed seeing her unexpected exhibition of riding and shooting and roping.

Marcia felt what she had regarded as righteous anger draining from her. What must Bill think of her? Pretending she couldn't ride, and scorning herself for being in love with a bone-headed . . .

But wait. Bill had tricked *her*. There was still Lita Carson. The rancher had mentioned Bill playing one gal against another. As Bill's freckled face appeared, water spilling from his hat, she saw that his hands were shaking.

"Stop that shiverin', Bill, an' gimme thet water," ordered the homely woman with the stringy, graying hair. "Land o' time! I'm hopin' she gives yuh yore come uppance. Yuh allus was a no-good, sneakin' scut, even when yuh was nothin' but a red-headed brat stealin' out o' my beehives, an' tryin' to lie yorself out'n it."

Marcia kept her eyes closed.

"You think—you're sure she'll be all right?" Bill's voice was hoarse.

"Told yuh so, didn't I?" exclaimed the woman. "An' yuh owe her a heap. It jest happened to be that Carrano greaser hisself she shot off'n his hoss."

"I don't care about that . . ."

Marcia's brown eyes were suddenly wide and looking at Bill, and he was kneeling beside her.

"Marcia—honey, can you talk?"

Marcia felt that she had to save some of her pride. Like as not, this rough but kindly woman would be Bill's ranch housekeeper.

"Yes, William." And Martha managed to control her voice. "I can talk. You went away so suddenly, you forgot your diploma. I was bringing it along for you to give to Lita Carson, as you planned."

"Look—Marcia—I guess I'm not all

I should be. I . . ."

Apparently Bill James found his own pride suddenly.

"But I'm plumb forgittin'," he drawled. "There's a school-ma'am I was honin' to teach what was the right side to board a hoss. An' I figger she ain't got no right to be learnin' kids when she's willin' to cheat in markin' papers so's to git rid of a feller she don't like."

Marcia blazed back at him.

"Yuh kin take yore dang-whanged diploma to yore Lita Carson! An' I'm hopin' she finds out yuh ain't no better than a—than—a smelly, lowdown sheepherder!" she finished.

Bill James was staring at her. Marcia's red mouth was tight, and she pulled the diploma, suddenly, from inside the man's shirt she was wearing.

There was a long half minute when Marcia wished she could die.

"Seein' that's the way yuh want it," drawled Bill, "I'll give it to Lita."

His hand reached out for the paper. A hard, brown hand slapped down upon his fingers. The homely, grayhaired woman reached out and caught hold of Bill's ear.

"So thet's been yore shenanigans, Bill James!" The woman's voice was hard and dry. "I oughter twist off yore ear like I nigh done fer stealin' honey. Misusin' my name, an' me a respectable old maid what's been yore ranch neighbor all yore no-good life."

First Marcia was crying. Then she was laughing and she couldn't stop.

"Reckon I'd oughter had more sense, Lita," said Bill, and he smiled sadly at the older woman. "What'll I do now to make up for it?"

Lita Carson smiled, and her homely face looked beautiful to Marcia.

"Yuh gimme thet diplomer fust," said Lita grimly. "Yuh allus was a hand fer stealin' honey, an' yuh won't never find one thet's sweeter. Now yuh take 'er in yore arms an' kiss 'er afore I twist yore danged ear clean off."

Bill James saved his ear. And Marcia Adams knew for sure that she never was meant to be a schoolma'am.

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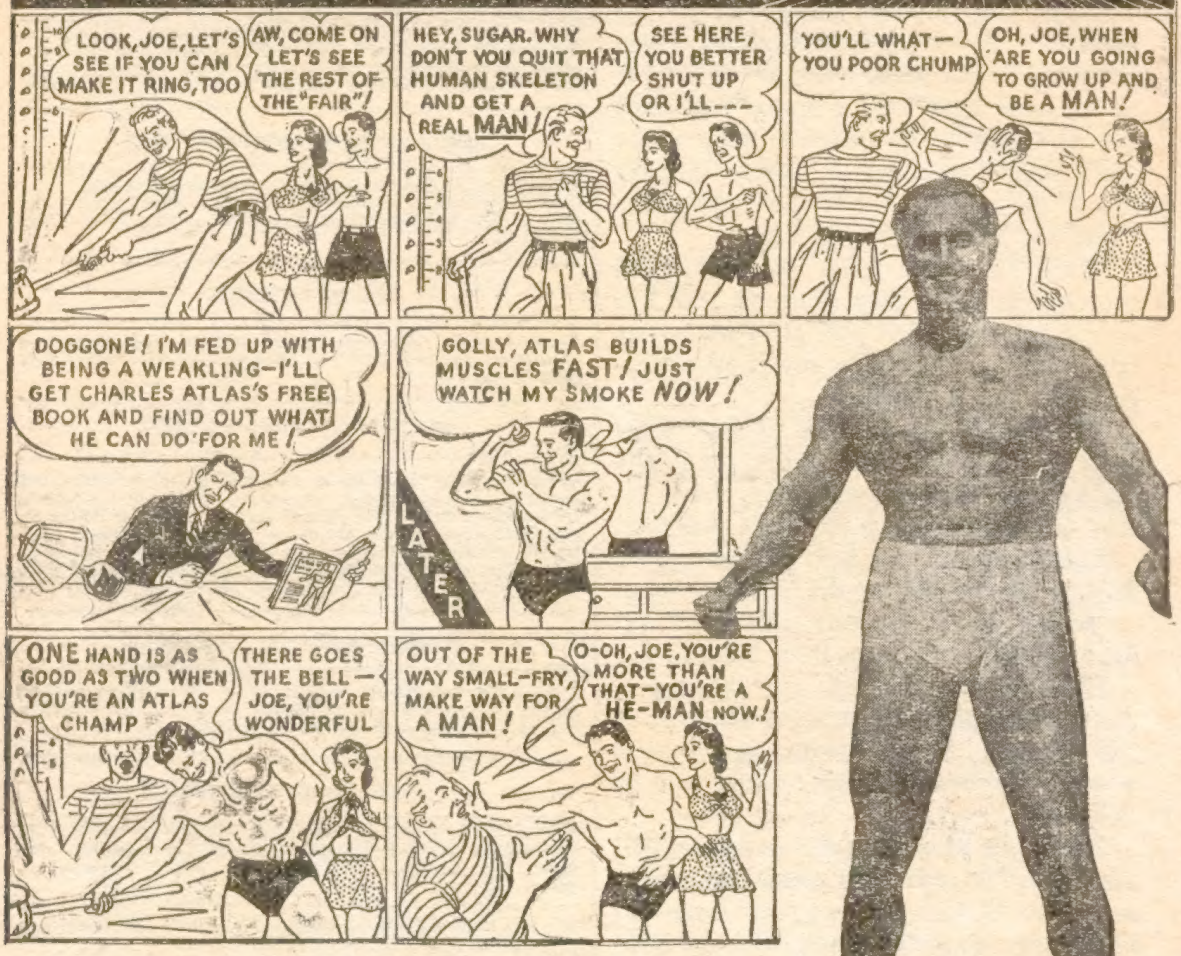

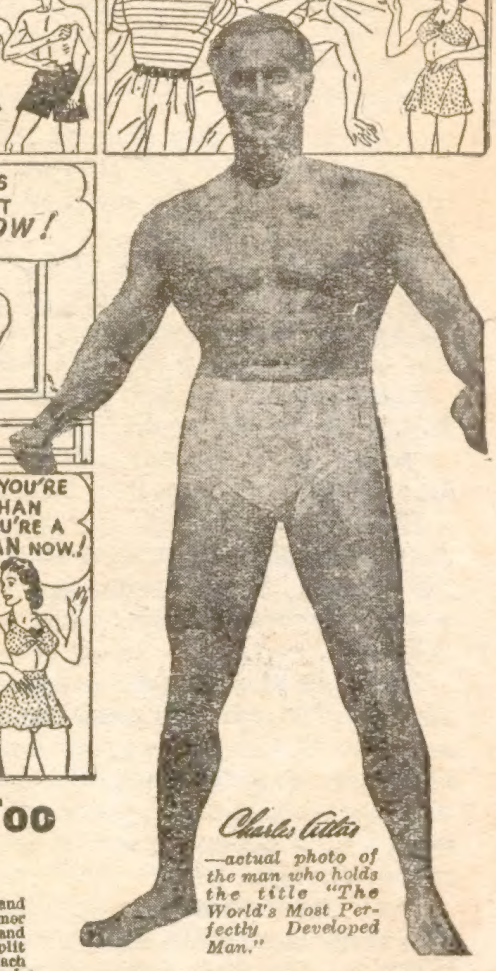

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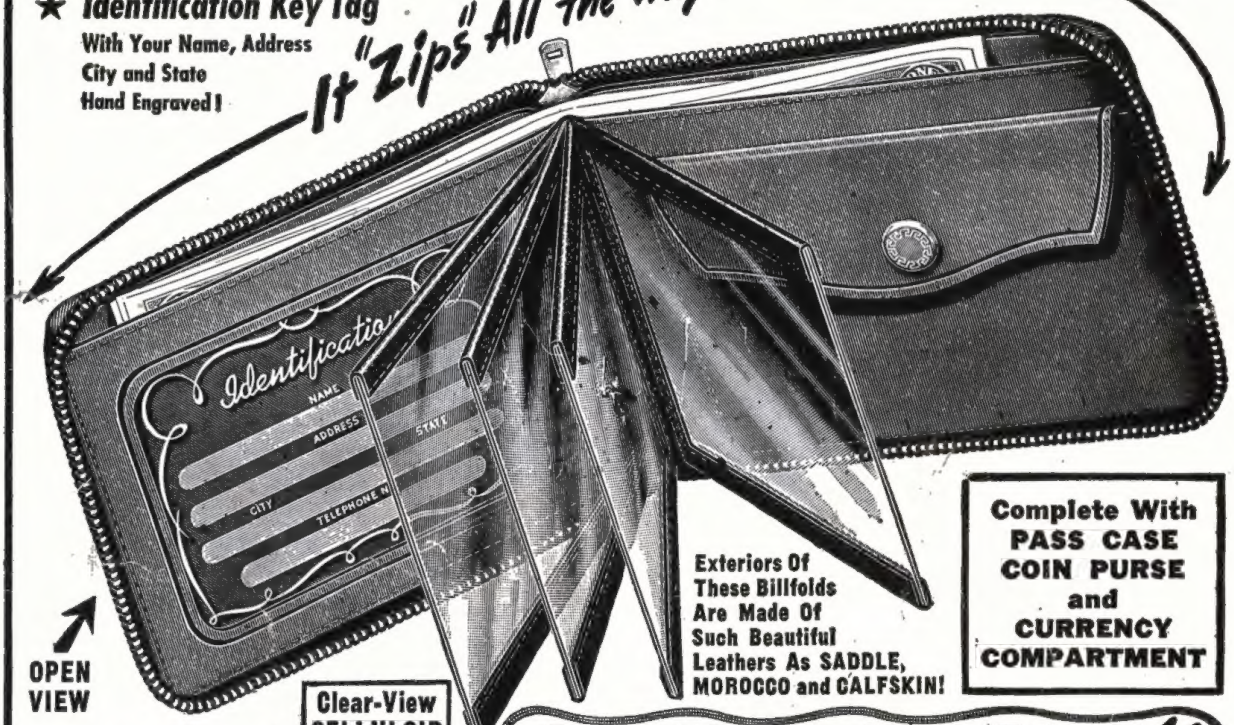

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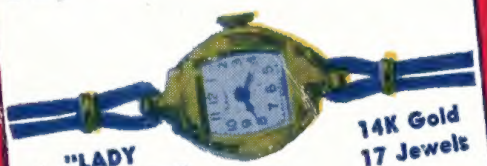

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